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**EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S  
EMPOWERMENT AND THE INTERNET IN CHINA: POTENTIALS  
AND CONSTRAINTS**

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PhD  
2016

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
AND THE INTERNET IN CHINA: POTENTIALS AND CONSTRAINTS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the  
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## Abstract

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This thesis reports on an exploratory study of the relationship between the Internet and women's empowerment in China. The theoretical framework of the study combines feminist theorisations of power – the core concept of empowerment – with insights from sociological perspectives on power and gender, as well as collective action theory. This allows for the conceptualisation of women's empowerment as a dynamic process that is shaped by a set of communicative practices.

Focusing on female Chinese bloggers and women's groups of different organisational types, this study aims to explore the respective ways in which these two types of women actors use the Internet with a view to examining whether, and the extent to which it enables them to generate a sense of empowerment. The empirical data mainly derives from interviews with female bloggers and with staff members from different women's groups, as well as from a features analysis and social network analysis of the sampled blogs and official websites of studied groups.

Overall, the findings suggest that the opportunities offered by the Internet for women's empowerment through awareness-raising, social interactions, and the organising of collective action, are limited. For female bloggers, their activities do not translate the new communicative practices afforded by the Internet into concrete action to bring about changes in their everyday life. On the contrary, blogs become an alternative platform to discipline their behaviours and to reinforce patriarchal gendered norms. Moreover, the research finds that the promise of empowerment is further undermined by the pervasive commercialisation of the Internet and state control. For women's groups, contextual factors prevent them from fully realising the potential of the Internet for increasing their organisational visibility, promoting public awareness about gender issues, building a sense of the collective, campaigning, or networking. The major barriers in these processes are state control, a lack of resources, online censorship, and at times, competition from commercial sites. In this respect, the Internet does not play a significant role in forming a collective to challenge existing unjust power relations.



## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>List of Tables .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>List of Figures .....</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>Chapter 1     Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2     Developing a Conceptual Framework for Women's Empowerment</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1     Theoretical Basis of Women's Empowerment: Feminist Perspectives on Power	9
2.1.1     Power as 'Power over': Domination and Empowerment .....	10
2.1.2     Power as 'Power to': Agency and Challenge to 'Power over' .....	15
2.1.3     Power as 'Power with': Resistance to 'Power over', Women's Movements, and Collective Empowerment .....	17
2.2     Women's Empowerment as a Dynamic Process: A Proposal for a Communication Approach.....	20
2.3     Rethinking Women's Empowerment as a Communication Phenomenon .....	23
2.3.1     Developing Women's Consciousness through Voice .....	23
2.3.2     Constructing a Public Identity .....	27
2.3.3     Organising Collective Action .....	28
2.4     Concluding Remarks.....	32
<b>Chapter 3     Creating Theoretical Links between the Internet and Women's Empowerment .....</b>	<b>34</b>
3.1     What is the Internet? .....	34
3.1.1     Linking the Internet to Communication .....	35
3.1.2     The Internet, Communication, and Genre.....	38
3.2     Feminist Critique of Power: Rethinking the Theoretical Basis of Women's Empowerment in the New Communication Environment .....	39
3.2.1     'Power over': A Reflection of the Real-World Power Hierarchy .....	40
3.2.2     Opportunities for 'Power to' .....	42
3.2.3     Networking and 'Power with' .....	46
3.3     Relating Women's Empowerment to the Internet: A Communication Paradigm .....	48
3.3.1     Promoting Women's Consciousness through Self-Expression and Storytelling	48
3.3.2     Performance of the Self: A New Source of Power to Control Identities.....	50
3.3.3     Capability of Organising Personal Social Networks: Emergence of Social Empowerment.....	53
3.3.4     New Dynamics of 'Power with' for Women's Organising and Collective Action	55
3.4     Concluding Remarks: Understanding Women's Empowerment in the Internet Age	58
<b>Chapter 4     Contextual Background: Women, Feminism, and the Internet in China</b>	<b>61</b>
4.1     What is a Chinese Woman? .....	61
4.1.1     Chinese Women in Early Time (Before 1949): A Brief Historical Account .....	62

4.1.2	Chinese Women in the Mao Era: Between 1949 and 1976 .....	66
4.1.3	Chinese Women in the Reform Era: Between the Late 1970s and the 1990s ...	69
4.1.4	The Image of Chinese Women in the Twenty-First Century .....	71
<b>4.2</b>	<b>Translating the Western Concept of Feminism into Local Action .....</b>	<b>73</b>
4.2.1	Building a National Legislative Framework .....	74
4.2.2	The Processes of Women's Organising: The All-China's Women Federation and Women's Civic Associations .....	77
<b>4.3</b>	<b>The Internet in China .....</b>	<b>80</b>
4.3.1	Chinese Women's Use of the Internet .....	81
4.3.2	A Brief Introduction to the Chinese Internet Environment .....	84
4.3.3	Governance, Censorship, and Commercialisation .....	86
4.3.4	Forming a Carnavalesque Chinese Internet: Users' Reactions to Political Control .....	88
<b>4.4</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Chapter 5 A Multi-Method Study of Women's Empowerment and the Internet: Design, Implementation and Evaluation .....</b>		
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Methodological Framework: A Mixed Methods Study .....</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Thinking about the Potential Use of Web Sphere Analysis and Network Ethnography .....</b>	<b>96</b>
5.2.1	Web Sphere Analysis .....	96
5.2.2	Network Ethnography .....	97
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Main Phase of Study I: Application of Features Analysis and Social Network Analysis .....</b>	<b>99</b>
5.3.1	Features Analysis .....	99
5.3.1.1	Individual Bloggers .....	99
5.3.1.2	Women's Groups .....	102
5.3.2	Social Network Analysis for Individual Bloggers and Women's Groups .....	105
5.3.3	Reflections and Implications for the Next Phase of the Study .....	106
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Main Phase of Study II: In-Depth Interviews .....</b>	<b>111</b>
5.4.1	Gaining Access: Two Different Stories .....	112
5.4.2	Preparing the Interview Guide .....	116
5.4.3	On the Spot: Sampling, Action and Reflections .....	117
5.4.4	Analysing the Interview Data .....	120
5.4.5	Reflections on the Role of a Researcher during Interviews .....	120
<b>5.5</b>	<b>Main Phase of Study III: Revisiting Features Analysis and Social Network Analysis .....</b>	<b>122</b>
5.5.1	Women's Blogs .....	123
5.5.1.1	Sampling .....	123
5.5.1.2	Features Analysis .....	124
5.5.1.3	Social Network Analysis .....	125
5.5.1.4	Additional Methods for Data Analysis and Interpretation I: Discourse Analysis 125	
5.5.1.5	Additional Methods for Data Analysis and Interpretation II: Content Analysis 127	
5.5.2	Women's Groups .....	128
<b>Chapter 6 Female Bloggers and Self-Empowerment .....</b>		
<b>6.1</b>	<b>A Brief Introduction of the Sampled Female Bloggers .....</b>	<b>130</b>
<b>6.2</b>	<b>Self-Expression Online and Women's Awareness of the Self .....</b>	<b>134</b>
6.2.1	Personal Journal: Being a Storyteller .....	138
6.2.2	Agony Aunt: A Double-Edged Sword .....	143
6.2.3	Tutorial/Guide: Reflecting a Blogging Context Shaped by Conventional Norms 148	

6.2.4	Criticism/View: Getting Involved in Public/Political Debate.....	151
6.2.5	Arts Portfolio: Building a Creative Sense of Self.....	157
<b>6.3</b>	<b>Selective Features of Weblogs that Allow for Identity Projection.....</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>6.4</b>	<b>Managing Connections of the Self for Personal Social Networks .....</b>	<b>164</b>
6.4.1	Audience Circle: A Stratification of Personal Connections .....	164
6.4.2	Peer Circle: Common Ground, Trust, and Offline Relationships.....	168
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Women's Groups and Women's Empowerment in China .....</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>7.1</b>	<b>Getting to Know the Organisational Actors: Women's Groups.....</b>	<b>172</b>
7.1.1	Government Agencies .....	173
7.1.2	Civic Associations .....	174
7.1.3	University-Based Centres.....	176
7.1.4	Online Communities .....	177
<b>7.2</b>	<b>Web Practice of Informing .....</b>	<b>177</b>
7.2.1	Providing Organisational Information for Identity Projection.....	178
7.2.2	Disseminating Information to Raise Public Awareness of Gender Issues .....	186
<b>7.3</b>	<b>Creating a Sense of the Collective through the Internet.....</b>	<b>195</b>
7.3.1	Websites, Public Space, and Affiliation to Women's Groups.....	195
7.3.2	Public Communication versus Private Communication.....	201
<b>7.4</b>	<b>A New Space for Political Campaigns within an Authoritarian Context? .....</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>7.5</b>	<b>Developing Inter-Organisational Relations: Online and Offline.....</b>	<b>213</b>
7.5.1	Face-to-Face Communication and Inter-Organisational Alliances.....	213
7.5.2	Inter-Organisational Alliances on the Web.....	219
7.5.2.1	Hyperlinks for a Public Display of Connections .....	220
7.5.2.2	Facilitating the Process of Information Sharing through Cross-Postings .....	223
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Discussion: Does the Internet Empower Women in the Context of China? .....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>8.1</b>	<b>Why the Internet, Women's Empowerment, and China?.....</b>	<b>225</b>
<b>8.2</b>	<b>Role of the Internet in the Development of Chinese Women's Empowerment .....</b>	<b>229</b>
8.2.1	The Internet and the Rise in Self-Empowerment of Chinese Women.....	230
8.2.2	The Internet and the Emergence of a Political Process of Women's Empowerment.....	235
<b>8.3</b>	<b>Implications for the Internet and Chinese Women's Empowerment .....</b>	<b>241</b>
<b>8.4</b>	<b>Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research .....</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Concluding Remarks .....</b>	<b>245</b>
	<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>247</b>
	<b>Appendix I Features Analysis Codebook for Women's Blogs in Phase I .....</b>	<b>266</b>
	<b>Appendix II Features Analysis Codebook for Websites of Women's Groups in Phase I.....</b>	<b>270</b>
	<b>Appendix III Interview Guide for Women's Groups.....</b>	<b>272</b>
	<b>Appendix IV Email Interview Guide for Ai Xiaoyang.....</b>	<b>274</b>
	<b>Appendix V Names of Interviewees.....</b>	<b>276</b>
	<b>Appendix VI Interview Guide for the Green-Red Group .....</b>	<b>279</b>
	<b>Appendix VII Final Codebook for Women's Blogs .....</b>	<b>281</b>
	<b>Appendix VIII Final Codebook for Websites of Women's Groups.....</b>	<b>283</b>

## List of Tables

---

Table 4.1 Classification of sensitive subjects .....	87
Table 5.1 Websites of the seventeen women's groups for Phase I.....	104
Table 5.2 Further directions of the study based on Phase I results .....	109
Table 5.3 Groups which agreed to in-depth interviews.....	113
Table 6.1 Blog age and recency of updates .....	133
Table 6.2 Major topics in the sample of SBE and non-SBE blogs .....	135
Table 6.3 Blog features for self-display.....	159
Table 6.4 Communicative practices with the audience .....	164
Table 6.5 Types of comments posted on the ten most popular SBE blogs.....	166
Table 7.1 Online features of informing for spreading expert knowledge about women's issues.....	189
Table 7.2 Online features for creating connections with the public .....	200
Table 7.3 Interactive features adopted across sites .....	208

## List of Figures

---

Figure 2.1 Stromquist's model of the empowerment process .....	20
Figure 2.2 Carr's model of the cyclical processes in the empowerment of women ....	22
Figure 4.1 One page of Chinese Girl's Progress (Nv Xuebao; 女学报) .....	64
Figure 4.2 The cover of the first issue of Ling Long (玲珑) .....	65
Figure 4.3 Image of 'Iron Girls' (tie niangzi, 铁娘子) .....	67
Figure 4.4 Gap between male and female Internet users in China .....	81
Figure 4.5 Chinese Internet Users, 1997-2015 (in millions) .....	84
Figure 4.6 The development of weblogs in China .....	85
Figure 5.1 Screenshot of homepage of Sina Blog Eladies (SBE) .....	101
Figure 6.1 A female author's ('Ai Xiaoyang') blog .....	131
Figure 6.2 Emerging topic genres .....	137
Figure 6.3 Example of the topic genre of 'arts portfolio' (emoticons designed by the blogger) .....	158
Figure 6.4 Examples of a mini-CV and narrative for self-description .....	163
Figure 6.5 Network map of the SBE sample .....	169
Figure 6.6 Network map formed between the SBE and the Green-Red Group .....	170
Figure 7.1 The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) homepage and online features for the organisation's publicity .....	181
Figure 7.2 Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC) homepage and online features for the organisation's publicity .....	182
Figure 7.3 A photograph centred on the theme of 'anti-domestic violence' .....	211
Figure 7.4 Network diagram of the 17 women's groups based on hyperlinks .....	222
Figure 7.5 Information sharing circle based on the hyperlink network .....	224

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*I hereby declare that all the material contained in this thesis is my own work*

*Xiao Han*



## Chapter 1 Introduction

---

Since the early 1990s, fierce debates about the empowering potential of the Internet for women's liberation have raged (Curran, 2012). From initial proliferation of dystopian/utopian visions, to Donna Haraway's groundbreaking *Cyborg Manifesto*, and further to the accounts of the mutual shaping of technology and gender, the Internet has now moved beyond these claims and has subsided into banality in terms of creating either good or bad changes in women's personal and political lives. However, I am not interested in drawing the line between 'the good' and 'the bad'. Rather, my curiosity lies in what the Internet means to women, how women perceive the role of the Internet in their life circumstances, and how they leverage the affordances of the Internet to meet their personal and political needs, desires, and requirements.

To address these concerns, I have narrowed my focus to Chinese women: not only because I am part of this group, but also because the issue around their liberation has always been based on the dichotomy of woman-ism and feminism. My interest is not to defend either view, but to move beyond this division and merge it into broader social changes in relation to Chinese women. Since the late 1980s, China's market economy reforms and integration within the globalisation have transformed the ways in which women explore their individual identities, but, at the same time, their roles are still closely related to traditional obligations and family responsibilities. In addition, the burgeoning demand for a consumerist culture has further rendered bodies of Chinese women as sexual objects to be commodified, which in turn carries the risk of the inversion of male gaze. On the other hand, at the national level, China's power holder – the China's Communist Party (CCP) – actively promotes gender equality, and also set 'equality between men and women' as a basic state policy. Ironically, in social reality, Chinese women still need to face the challenges in different aspects of their lives, such as family, education, employment, and decision-making.

When the discussions about women's issues keep intensified, the Internet in China is simultaneously emerging, developing and expanding. Against this backdrop, some scholars observe that the Internet has come to appear in Chinese women's lives, and help

them to meet their personal and political needs, desires, and aspirations (Farrer, 2007; Kuah-Pearce, 2008; T. Liu, 2008; McLaren, 2003; Sima & Pugsley, 2010; Yang, 2003a, 2009b, 2014a). In particular, by December 2015, among 688 million Internet users in China, nearly half of them have been women (CNNIC, 2016). In addition, the number of women who engage in the blogging activity was nearly 10 per cent higher than that of male counterparts since July 2009 (CNNIC, 2009).

All these trends encourage me to explore the role of the Internet in the process of women's empowerment in China. So the next question arises: why did I choose empowerment as the central theme? To my knowledge, this is mainly due to the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing in 1995.

In the document, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, annexed to the FWCW, it is striking that the term 'women's empowerment' is strongly endorsed, and at the same time, the document calls for the contribution of the media, especially information and communication technologies (ICTs), for its promotion. Since then, it seems that exploring the relationship between ICTs and women's empowerment has become a pressing concern among Chinese scholars, activists, practitioners, decision-makers, and various women's organisations, ranging from the grassroots to the institutional level, as these actors were also the key participants of the FWCW (see Wang, 1996; Wang & Zhang, 2010). It is just these trends that open up new avenues for my interests on the role of the Internet in women's empowerment in China.

Moreover, under the influence of the FWCW, a wide range of bottom-up, autonomous, or even grassroots women's groups have begun to emerge and change the dominant position of the government-led All-China's Women's Federation (ACWF) – the only legal women's organisation since the aftermath of the 1989 Students Movement. Although both the new organisations and the ACWF take part in the processes of improving women's status and promoting gender equality in China, it is impossible to say that they themselves constitute collective actors to bring about social change. In fact, there are clear boundaries between non-governmental women's organisations and the ACWF, as the former are quite willing to detach themselves from the state regime, while the latter

is involved in the institutional system. Such opposing organisational characters inherent in these two types of group actor became another initial stimulation for my explorations.

In addition, having considered the open, low-cost characteristics of the Internet, both non-governmental women's groups and the ACWF started to establish their websites in the early 2000s (see T. Liu, 2008; Yang, 2003a, 2009b). In addition, some Internet-based, loosely-structured women's groups came into being, while a number of gender research centres in higher education institutions launched websites to disseminate knowledge on gender issues and to organise relevant campus activities. At this point, those physical groups' adoption of the Internet, alongside the emerging new types of online communities, added a further dimension to my interest.

Moreover, having just finished an MA dissertation on Chinese women's use of weblogs and their role in expressing their sexual rights, I was interested in expanding this research focus and to rethink whether I could connect it with women's empowerment. In addition, I realised that all my previous observations on the relationship between women's groups/organisations and the Internet, as well as the possible links to the empowerment of women, seemed to be more oriented towards the collective dimension. This intrigued me so as to include Chinese female bloggers to further my enquiry, as they could shed light on how the Internet affords individual expression for women – which is a relatively new practice in China. In addition, due to the popularity of weblogs among Chinese women, I also would like to consider how they use this online space. However, as I mention in Chapter 4, very few academic texts at the time explored the relationship between the Internet and women's empowerment in China. In this sense, it is no surprise that systematic empirical evidence on the subject was rather scarce.

Thus, I decided to address this gap by focusing on female bloggers and women's groups. However, this would not be an easy task. This is mainly due to the fact that, as will be explained in Chapter 2, women's empowerment is now used more as a 'buzzword' than a theoretical concept. This problematic treatment of the notion meant that a long time was needed to find relevant academic publications that could help me to uncover its theoretical base.

This does not mean that no earlier academic texts touched on the subject. The first group of scholars to broaden my horizon came from the field of development studies (e.g. Batliwala, 1994, 2007; Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2010; Rowlands, 1995, 1997; Stromquist, 1995). They took the core concept of *power* in *empowerment* as the common thread to initiate theoretical discussion. In the process of reading their work, I found that they shared the assumption that the conceptual value of empowerment was based on three power relations: ‘power over’, ‘power to’, and ‘power with’. A further reading of these different power models revealed that they indeed stemmed from Michel Foucault and his followers in feminist research (e.g. Allen, 1998; Allen, 2005, 2008; Bartky, 1998; Collins, 2000; Deveaux, 1994; I. M. Young, 1990, 1994; K. Young, 1993). This then turned my attention to feminist scholarship which provides insightful ideas to refine the understanding of women’s empowerment.

In line with this enquiry, I, at the same time, followed the work of key social theorists, such as Anthony Giddens, Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, and Patricia Collins, whose work allowed me to conceptualise women’s empowerment. As I also explain in Chapter 2, collective action theory is another major field that I was able to draw upon. This is because the fierce debates around women’s empowerment were sparked by women’s movements throughout the world from the late 1960s onwards. Thus, the research on feminist movements (e.g. Hurwitz & Taylor, 2012; Pelak et al., 1999; Reger, 2002a, 2002b, 2004; Reger et al., 2008; Staggenborg, 1998, 2002; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005; V. Taylor, 1989; V. Taylor & Whittier, 1992, 1995; Whittier, 1995, 2002) is particularly useful for outlining the conceptual framework of women’s empowerment. Building upon these authors, I propose a communication approach to theorising about women’s empowerment as a dynamic process which is shaped by a set of communicative practices.

To build a dialogue between my outlined framework of women’s empowerment and the Internet, in Chapter 3, I also use communication as an entry point. In existing media, communication, and technology studies, theorists have attached the importance of the Internet to new forms of communicative practices and their effects on individuals, organisations, and society at large (e.g. Boczkowski & Lievrouw, 2008; Castells, 2009/2013; Gitelman, 2006; Lievrouw, 2004, 2009, 2011, 2012; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006b). Their

stance on the Internet further convinced me to place communication in a more central position and to demonstrate how it can be linked to women's empowerment.

Following that, in Chapter 4, the central task is to contextualise women's empowerment by providing an overall context for the relationship between women, feminism, and the Internet in China. It is also important to help us to understand how in the context of China, the notion of feminism and women's empowerment is thought of.

All the foregoing discussion presented in Chapter 2 to Chapter 4 sets the scene for the development of the following research questions in my PhD study:

**Main Question:** What is the role of the Internet in women's empowerment in China?

**RQ1:** What is the role of women's blogs in the process of women's empowerment in China?

- How do female bloggers use their weblogs in the process of performing their identity, connecting with others and developing their interpersonal networks, as well as expressing themselves about the issues that concern them?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of weblogs in this process?

**RQ2:** How do women's groups use websites to empower women in China?

- What is the role of websites in the process of informing, building a sense of the collective, as well as campaigning, and networking with peer organisations?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of websites in this process?

To answer these questions, I conducted a three-phase study by adopting a multi-methods approach in both online and offline realms.

Thus, in Chapter 5, I discuss the empirical research stage and present how I designed, implemented, and evaluated this three-phase study by adopting a multi-methods approach. In so doing, I first developed a methodological framework by combining 'Web sphere analysis' (Foot & Schneider, 2006) and 'network ethnography' (Howard, 2002, 2006), which are two newly proposed methodologies pertaining to research on online communication actions. Then, in the first part of this chapter (Phase I study), I document

how I applied the methods of features analysis and social networks, derived from these two methodologies, to my study. The second part of this chapter is my Phase II study, in which I show how I deployed in-depth interviews in the fieldwork research in China. Finally, I present how I improved and completed my empirical study based on the results of the previous two phases (Phase III study).

Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 outline my empirical findings, and present my interpretation and analysis of those empirical data. The aim of Chapter 6 is to answer the first research question in the study. By drawing on the results of features analysis, social network analysis, and discourse analysis, as well as on data from in-depth interviews, I analyse the ways in which female authors make use of their blogs to raise awareness, to construct a public identity, and to organise personal social networks. I also shed light on the possible links between these communicative practices and women's empowerment.

The aim of Chapter 7 is to answer the second research question in the study. By drawing on the results of in-depth interviews and features analysis, as well as on data from social network analysis, I analyse the ways in which women's groups make use of their websites for informing, building a sense of the collective, campaigning, and networking with allies. I also shed light on the possible links between communicative actions and women's empowerment.

Chapter 8 is the discussion chapter in which I attempt to synthesise the main findings so as to produce a thorough understanding of the relationship between women's empowerment and the Internet in China. I also assess the implications of my research on women's empowerment in China, as well as its possible theoretical contributions to existing scholarship. Finally, I outline some suggestions for further investigation.

Chapter 9 is the final conclusion of this research. In this chapter, aside from providing a summary of my PhD study, I also discuss the limitations of my thesis and reflect on future directions.

Therefore, focusing on Chinese female bloggers and women's groups of different organisational types, the aim of this study is to explore the role of the Internet in women's empowerment in China. To set the background for this analysis, I first develop a solid framework of women's empowerment and its relationship with the Internet. I then turn

my attention to the context of China with the intention of explaining how Chinese women's issues are addressed. The final part is the results emerged from my fieldwork and the discussion of the developed research questions, as well as what conclusion I obtain from the present study.

## Chapter 2    Developing a Conceptual Framework for Women's Empowerment

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The study of women's empowerment, inspired by various women's movements from the late 1960s onwards, encompasses a wide range of concepts, approaches, and practices in different disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, development, and feminism. Yet, since the late 1990s, the term 'empowerment' has been transformed from a political concept into a *buzzword*, as major international development agencies, from a top-down perspective, have institutionalised it as a mainstream policy or agenda-setting, while neglecting its original meaning and conceptual value (Arnfred, 2002, p.81; Batliwala, 2007, p.557). For example, in 1995, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) introduced the 'Gender and Development Index' (GDI), the 'Gender Empowerment Measure' (GEM), and the 'Gender Inequality Index' (GII) to measure the level of women's empowerment in economic, political, and decision-making dimensions in different countries. In the same year, the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing particularly emphasised the strategic significance of women's empowerment, referring to it as 'fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace' (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1996, p.3). In 2000, the UNDP set women's empowerment and gender equality as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and developed a number of indicators to be met in education, employment, and political participation. Against this backdrop, many studies have devised various quantitative or qualitative methods to measure outcomes for women's empowerment (e.g. Giele & Smock, 1977; Kabeer, 1999; Malhotra & Schuler, 2005; Moghadam & Senftova, 2005; Mosedale, 2005; G. Young et al., 1994).

On the contrary, many scholars still insist that we need to treat women's empowerment as a concept and to explore its theoretical underpinnings (e.g. Adams, 2008; Arnfred, 2002; Batliwala, 2007; Kabeer, 2010; Thompson, 2007), but scholarly research has not yet developed a satisfactory account of empowerment. This chapter aims to address this gap by laying down the foundations for a systematic framework of women's empowerment. Towards this end, it is important to begin by recognising that empowerment is a multifaceted concept, and is therefore understood differently by



different schools of thought. To gain a clearer picture of women's empowerment for the purposes of this study, I mainly draw from the work of feminist theorists, based on a combination of their different positions, perspectives, and approaches. I will also locate women's empowerment in a broader framework that takes account of different theoretical orientations towards empowerment, especially the sociological perspectives on power and gender, as well as collective action theory.

## **2.1 Theoretical Basis of Women's Empowerment: Feminist Perspectives on Power**

Since the 1980s, there has been a growing body of literature by feminist theorists who write about the issue of women's empowerment. (e.g. Allen, 1998, 2005, 2008; Batliwala, 1994, 2007; Bookman & Morgen, 1988; Bystydzienski, 1992; Collins, 2000; Deveaux, 1994; Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2010; Papa et al., 2000; Parpart et al., 2002; Rowlands, 1995; Rowlands, 1997; Stromquist, 1995; Surrey, 1991; I. M. Young, 1990, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1994). This tendency was triggered, as many scholars observed, by a wide range of women's movements during the second wave of feminism (1960s-1980s), in which empowerment was the central item on the political agenda (e.g. Allen, 1998, 2005, 2008; Collins, 2000; Deveaux, 1994; Jönsson, 2010; Stromquist, 1995; White, 2004; I. M. Young, 1990, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1994).

Among the fierce debate on women's empowerment, great emphasis has been placed on the raising of women's consciousness about their powerless position in both the public and private domains. A well-established fact is that it is the existing structural and social arrangements that have produced and sustained women's discrimination and disadvantage in different societies. As such, women's personal change is quite important. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that 'micro-changes may remain invisible to individual women. Yet *collectively*, they can have a profound impact' (Collins, 2000, p.293; emphasis added). To achieve this, oppressed women need to participate with others so that their personal problems have a chance to become political issues (Carr, 2003). This process involves the use of collective power, which in turn not only reinforces women's realisation

of their individual goals, but also acts together for the attainment of shared benefits (see Allen, 1998; Bimber et al., 2012).

Indeed, underlying these accounts of women's empowerment are the dynamics of power, which set the scene for a discussion of the important concepts that could outline a conceptualisation of how women can foster their own empowerment. Furthermore, as the root concept, it is no surprise that the existing theoretical discussions of women's empowerment have attached great importance on the notion of *power*. As Collins (2000) argues, 'how does one develop a politics of empowerment without understanding how power is organised and operates?' (p.292). In this sense, the feminist critique of power offers a useful starting point for developing a thorough understanding of women's empowerment. In what follows, by drawing from feminist work, I will review the ways in which power is conceptualised, as well as its connections with women's empowerment.

### **2.1.1 Power as 'Power over': Domination and Empowerment**

Generally, scholars who theorise about empowerment through a feminist lens point out that the starting point for women's empowerment has often been the recognition of the existence of patriarchy and the subsequent urge to end men's domination over women (Papa et al., 2000, p.95). This is because the structural systems of this world are, overall, male-dominated, in which male-centred norms become the standard throughout all social institutions, relations, and practices (Lindsey, 2015, p.3). This means that social systems are structured around relatively stable patterns in which rules, norms, beliefs, and practices are defined by the dominant group of men, which leads to patriarchy being a very significant order of the social reality (Connell, 2009; Kabeer, 2010; Lindsey, 2015). In such a male-dominated world, Kabeer (2010) observes that 'women's needs, interests and experiences have been systematically excluded, misrepresented or subsumed' (p.106).

This tendency is particularly emphasised in the 'radical feminism' approach that emerged in the US from the second wave of the women's movement in the twentieth century. Radical feminists believe that 'sexism is at the core of patriarchal society and that all social institutions reflect it' (Lindsey, 2015, p.18). Within this perspective, there is a clear distinction between men's supremacy and women's oppression, i.e. what it means to

be a woman is to be subjected, whereas what it means to be a man is to be free (Allen, 1998, p.23). Moreover, such male-dominated social institutions, according to Collins (2000, pp.295-296), are large-scale, system wide, have operated over a long period of time, and *reproduce* women's subordination over time. Hence, it is no surprise that 'the domination relation between men and women will, of necessity, be *pervasive*' (Allen, 1998, p.23; emphasis added). Indeed, what radical feminists tend to emphasise is that 'women's oppression stems from male domination' (Lindsey, 2015, p.18).

At the same time, this position puts focus on the natural, essential, or biological differences between men and women as well as their psychological, behavioural, and social consequences (see West & Zimmerman, 1987, p.128). For example, in most societies, men tend to associate more with valued attributes and their working tasks are primarily within income-generating roles, while women are seen as less valued and mainly bear the responsibility for unpaid reproductive work (Kabeer, 2010, p.106). Moreover, such 'essentialist differences' between men and women are fundamental and enduring. In this sense, as West and Zimmerman (1987) argue, 'the institutional arrangements of a society can be seen as responsive to the differences – the social order being merely an accommodation to the natural order' (p.146).

Once again, this male-dominated structure is unavoidable. For women, this means the pervasiveness of men's power over women; that is, women are directly controlled by men in different aspects of their lives, including family, work, education, and even everyday interaction (Connell, 2009; Kabeer, 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). In this respect, power can be seen as the structural relations through which dominant groups of men establish principles that pattern the social practices of women (see Sewell, 1992; Thompson, 2007). Thus, in social reality, those norms, values, and customs applied to women are indeed created by men, which in turn maintains women's subordination.

This further turns our attention to 'post-structuralist' feminism – another important strand that expresses concerns about the situation of women's subordination and the analysis of male domination. In this respect, it is worth noting that, whereas radical feminists focus on power as structural relations, post-structuralist feminists extend their insights into power by relating it to discourses and social interactions (see Allen, 2005;

Deveaux, 1994; Thompson, 2007). This is because many post-structuralist feminists are inspired by the work of Michel Foucault, who, perhaps more than anyone else, has shaped feminist thinking about power. Foucault (1978, 1979, 1980) is often credited with introducing a type of power relations characterised by discipline, surveillance, and nominalisation (Allen, 2005; Buckingham, 2008; Deveaux, 1994). As Buckingham (2008) explains, 'rather than being held by sovereign authorities, power is now diffused through social relationships; rather than being regulated by external agencies, individuals are now encouraged to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behaviour falls within acceptable norms' (p.10).

Foucault's formulation inspired many feminists to argue for a conception of discursive power that explains the role of discourse, including patriarchal standards of femininity, gender norms, and so forth, in women's subordination. For instance, in an important critique, Bartky (1998) examines the ways in which disciplinary practices, in light of the modernisation of patriarchal domination, produce and regulate feminine bodies that reflect cultural norms on women (e.g. body size, gestures, appearance, and movements). This leads to another key element in relation to Foucault's disciplinary power – self-surveillance, or 'technologies of the self'. That is to say, women need to continuously monitor their bodily practices and behaviours to ensure their own conformity to standards of feminine norms (Cooper, 1994, p.437). Nevertheless, 'this self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy' (Bartky, 1998, p.42).

In line with Foucault, Butler (1990) proposes a 'performativity' approach to analyse the relationship between regulation and women's subjection. According to Butler (1990), 'the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through *a sustained set of acts*, posited through *the gendered stylisation* of the body' (Butler, 1990, p.xv; emphasis added). Underlying this point, as Butler (2004, p.55) argues, is Foucault's power mode of discipline and surveillance. As Elliott (2014) puts it, what Butler emphasises is 'how dominant heterosexual relations regulate practices of gender, and profoundly limit performed identities of sexuality' (p.126). In a similar vein, Brickell (2005) notes that 'performativity involves subsequent repetition or citation of gender norms'; that is, 'which compel some

appearance of masculinity and femininity while prohibiting others' (p.26; see also van Doorn, 2010).

Thus, it is disciplinary power that produces women's bodily practices, feminine behaviours, and female identity, which accord with institutionalised ideas and practices of patriarchal domination. From this perspective, Foucault's thesis helps us to understand regulatory power not only as *productive*, but also as *constitutive* in women's everyday lives (Bartky, 1998; Butler, 1990, 2004; Deveaux, 1994). This is because this power 'impacts directly on people's bodies as "discipline", as well as on their identities, *constituting* subject positions that people take up. And it is *productive*, not just repressive: it generates forms of life' (Connell, 2009, p.77). In this sense, women's subordination stems not only from top-down, structural forces, but also from routine lives. For instance, as West and Zimmerman (1987) note, any interactional situation serves as a reinforcement of patriarchal power, as both men and women 'in interaction organise their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behaviour of others in a similar light' (p.127).

Yet, it is important to recognise that Foucault's understanding of power also addresses women's internal impediments to their sense of freedom (Held, 1993), as it sheds light on 'women's internalisation of the view of the "other" to produce self-monitoring subjects' (Cooper, 1994, p.437). This is particularly referred to by development feminists as the existence of 'internalised oppression', reflecting the power of prevailing ideologies about women's inferiority (e.g. Rowlands, 1995; Rowlands, 1997). Internalised oppression means that 'people who are systematically denied power and influence in society internalise the messages they receive about what they are supposed to be like, and they may come to believe the messages to be true' (Rowlands, 1997, p.11). In this sense, there is an explicit assumption that women may accept their subordinate role in the existing societal order as long as their perceptions, cognitions, and preferences continue to be shaped by the taken-for-granted ideology of male domination.

All the foregoing discussion turns our attention to the ways in which men exercise power *over* women (see Allen, 1998; Allen, 2005). Indeed, there is a long history of 'power over' in social sciences to describe a conflicting relationship between domination and

subordination, or more specifically, how one group or individual exerts their will over others (Allen, 2005; Kabeer, 1999, 2005, 2010; Rowlands, 1997; Thompson, 2007).

In line with this enquiry, the definition of ‘power over’ provided by Amy Allen offers a useful entry point in recognising ‘what women’s empowerment is fundamentally about’. Allen (1998) defines ‘power over’ as ‘the ability of an actor or set of actors to constrain the choices available to another actor or set of actors in [a] nontrivial way’ (p.33). From the feminist perspective, Allen’s ‘power over’ goes as follows:

‘Not only is male power over women exercised by men who do not deliberately intend to do so, [but also] is exercised by men who deliberately intend *not* to do so. This is because, whatever their intentions are, they still act within a set of cultural, institutional, and structural relations of power that work to women’s disadvantage.’

(Allen, 1998, p.38)

As such, the starting point of women’s empowerment in this respect could be related to the processes by which women challenge patriarchal relations and produce changes in men’s traditional control over women (Batliwala, 1994, p.131). In other words, it is the exercise of ‘power over’ that motivates women to initiate their empowerment process.

However, this ‘power over’ only provides a one-dimensional view of women’s empowerment, as it primarily carries masculinist connotations of domination and control (Allen, 2005). Thus, it runs the risk of reducing women’s empowerment into a simple ‘zero-sum’ concept, i.e. women gaining power at men’s expense (Rowlands, 1997; Thompson, 2007). In other words, if we define women’s empowerment from the perspective of ‘power over’, ‘there will be some kind of reversal of relationships, and men will not only lose power but also face the possibility of having power wielded over them by women’ (Rowlands, 1997, p.11). This notion of women’s empowerment, as Rowlands further argues, is inherently threatening, since, in the eyes of men, women’s empowerment means that they no longer dominate women (Rowlands, 1997). Rowlands (1997) also leads us to ask: ‘is it necessarily an outcome of women’s empowerment that men should lose power; and further, should a loss of power be something to fear?’ (p.11).

### **2.1.2 Power as ‘Power to’: Agency and Challenge to ‘Power over’**

In fact, as Allen (1998, 2005) observes, many feminists, albeit from different theoretical stances, have noticed the above problem and have argued for an alternative conception of power to complement ‘power over’, i.e. power as ‘power to’. Compared with ‘power over’, ‘power to’ focuses on the positive or, in Giddens’ (1991) terms, the ‘generative’ elements of power, instead of seeing power as a negative force in association with domination and control. For feminists, women can make use of their positive skills of preserving, nurturing, mothering, and maintaining relationships to transform themselves, others, and even the world (Allen, 1998; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 1993; Surrey, 1991). This transformative power in turn provides the basis for alternatively conceptualising power as a capacity or creative ability, i.e. women as individual actors to achieve their goals and ends but not necessarily at the expense of others (see Allen, 1998; Allen, 2005; Rowlands, 1997). Thus, women’s empowerment is closely linked to the realisation of women’s potential to take actions to attain a series of ends and goals in their lives.

It is worth noting here that, as Allen (1998, 2005) states, some feminists view this model of ‘power to’ as being more oriented towards ‘power from within’, which is inherent in women when they pursue certain life projects. This conception of power is in fact an attempt to stress inner strength. Citing Williams (1995), Rowlands (1997) defines ‘power from within’ as ‘the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each one of us and makes us truly human. Its basis is self-acceptance and self-respect which extend, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals’ (p.13). Then, women’s empowerment in this regard correlates strongly with ‘perceived control’ (Schulz et al., 1995; Zimmerman, 1995) or ‘the emergence of an internal sense of self’ (Sheilds, 1995).

So far, the aforementioned feminist scholars have captured the fact that the core component in women’s empowerment is women’s ability to exercise ‘generative’ power in order to gain greater control over their own lives. This carries the basic meaning of empowerment which puts specific focus on the heightened sense of the self embedded in life situations and circumstances (see also Deveaux, 1994). If, as Thompson (2007) argues, we deny the basics of this self-transformative process, ‘empowerment becomes a meaningless term’ (p.24).

Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind that the 'power to' (including 'power from within') modality of power relations needs to be considered as a response to 'power over'. In other words, 'power to' is not located within a vacuum, wherein women only place their personal experiences at the centre of an appeal for freedom, but instead is conceived as resistance to 'power over'. Women's resistance, therefore, lies in their ability to 'attain an end or series of ends that serve to subvert domination' (Allen, 1998, p.35). In this formulation, 'power to' and 'power over' are in a dialectical relationship. That said, women can be described as being 'both dominated and empowered at the same time and in the context of the same norm, institution, or practice' (Allen, 1998, p.31).

Perhaps Kabeer's (1999, 2005, 2010) discussion on women's empowerment can be useful in this respect, as it provides us with a systematic clarification of the relationship between women's inner transformation and patriarchal structure. What Kabeer underlines is the importance of an individual's ability to make choices. Following this logic, empowerment refers to 'the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability' (Kabeer, 2005, p.13). Underlying this point, according to Deveaux (1994, p.234), is still the reiteration of, for much feminist literature, the premise that women are not passive victims uniformly dominated, but active agents.

Clearly then, such thinking reminds us of Anthony Giddens' work (1984, 1991), which can shape our ways of understanding the relationship between individual agency, autonomy, and actions on the one hand, and the structural, social, and cultural relations of gender on the other. More importantly, the dialectic interplay between human agency and structure, or in Giddens' words, the 'duality of structure', has a particular relevance to the notion of women's empowerment. For Giddens, 'structures shape people's practices, but it is also people's practices that constitute (and reproduce) structures'; in other words, 'human agency and structure, far from being *opposed*, in fact *presuppose* each other' (Sewell, 1992, p.4; emphasis in origin). In light of this, when women are powerful enough to develop themselves as *agents*, 'their actions may have the consequence of transforming the very structure that gave them the capacity to act' (Sewell, 1992, p.4).

In short, these aspects prove that structural relations have both enabling and constraining effects on women's development of their own empowerment. In social reality,



it is gender-related structural constraints that seem to be long-term barriers to the progression of a stronger sense of agency in women, as these cannot be changed overnight. However, gender-related structural constraints generate new opportunities for women to raise awareness and cast doubt on their subordinate status in social reality, which can actually help women experience a deep sense of empowerment. This process involves the development of female actors' capacities to make practical and normative judgements, and even reconfigure existing structures of thought and action in relation to their hopes, fears, and desires for the future (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p.971).

In this regard, the analysis of women's empowerment is based first and foremost on agency – a notion 'typically used to characterise individuals as autonomous, purposive and creative actors, capable of choice' (Lister, 2003, p.38). In line with Lister, agency is premised on both the cognitive notions of competence, confidence and assertiveness (Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012), and the behavioural dimension of decision-making in one's own life (see Kabeer, 2005; Rowlands, 1995). Thus, agency is not simply about the perceived recognition of individual subjectivity, but is also about the capacity to take action, which is important to one's exercise of agency. As Mishra and Tripathi (2011) note, 'women's agency can be said to be operative when it results in a fundamental shift in perceptions, or "inner transformation" so that women are able to define self-interest and choice, and consider themselves as not only able, but entitled to make choices' (p.59).

Collins (2000) also highlights this 'inner transformation' aspect, as she notes that '[defining] our realities *on our own terms* has far greater implications' (p.292; emphasis in origin). In this sense, women's empowerment is concerned with the processes through which individuals perceive, question, and reflect on their subordinate status and stereotypical gender roles, as well as exercise some sort of power to make a difference in their lives (see Collins, 2000; Giddens, 1984; Thompson, 2007).

### **2.1.3 Power as 'Power with': Resistance to 'Power over', Women's Movements, and Collective Empowerment**

However, women's empowerment is more than just an individual or personal matter, as collective power is much greater than isolated efforts of individual women, even if they

have benefited from 'power to' (including 'power from within') to bring about changes to their subordination (Batliwala, 1994; Rowlands, 1997; Stromquist, 1995; Thompson, 2007). In this respect, feminist researchers have adopted a new approach – the model of 'power with' – to shed light on the collective aspect of power. As such, the model of 'power with' suggests a necessity for the formation of a collectivity in the empowerment process. In this way, 'power with' can be understood as 'the ability of a collectivity to act together for the shared or common purpose of overturning a system of domination' (Allen, 1998, p.36). Within this perspective, women's empowerment needs to be organised around common goals to tackle the social problems associated with gender-related inequalities.

Again, like 'power to', 'power with' is also motivated by resistance to 'power over'. A typical example in this sense is the women's movement that challenges men's position of dominance by bringing women into the decision-making process (see also Jönsson, 2010; Papa et al., 2000; Thompson, 2007; White, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1994). As Allen (2008) points out, to challenge systematic relations of domination and oppression, 'some sort of collective action or struggle seems necessary' (p.164). This position is also echoed in the studies of social movements on gender relations. For instance, Pelak et al. (1999), drawing on the scholarship of women's movements in a global context, identify that researchers in the field have placed considerable emphasis on the importance of structural preconditions in explaining the rise of feminist collective mobilisations (see also Ferree & Mueller, 2004).

In this regard, feminist theorists, especially development feminists, commonly suggest the general importance of organised movements in accounting for the display of women's empowerment. Batliwala (1994), for instance, clearly states that 'to transform society, women's empowerment must become a political force, that is, an organised mass movement that challenges and transforms existing power structures' (p.134). Similarly, as Stromquist (1995, p.15) puts it, if a political component is applied to women's empowerment, this then entails a process that involves organisation and mobilisation for collective action to attain social transformation.

Thus, movements in altering gender relations can be seen as a powerful means to change the subordinate status of women. In other words, empowerment in relation to women is not merely an immediate response to a situation, but a key part of a social justice

agenda that often finds expression in various women's movements to transform male-dominated social orders (Thompson, 2007, p.71; White, 2004, p.23).

Moreover, it should be noted that the essence of 'power with' involves people participating in decision-making based on the 'working together' model, rather than in a top-down manner, in order to achieve social change (see Thompson, 2007). For feminists, this is 'a form of coalition politics' (Yuval-Davis, 1994, pp.188-189), which involves women's negotiation, joint effort, collaborations, and mutual support to pursue their common goals. When conceptualised in this way, women's empowerment can be considered a democratic organising process in which every woman involved plays a part in transforming oppressive structural relations (Papa et al., 2000; Thompson, 2007).

The feminist conceptions of power introduced above provide useful entry points to understand women's empowerment as a dynamic concept, as they do not treat power as a general term, instead unpacking it from three angles: 'power over', 'power to', and 'power with'. These three dimensions of power are not isolated from each other, as Allen (1998) suggests:

Having power-over presupposes having power-to: in order to have power over another, one must have the capacity or ability to act in such a way as to attain some end. Similarly, having power-with presupposes having power-to: power understood as the collective capacity to act so as to attain some shared end obviously presupposes power understood as the individual capacity to act so as to attain some end.

(Allen, 1998, p.37)

Such three-dimensional power relations reveal that the underlying meaning of power is the ability or capacity to act, which entails a process of change. Then, following this logic, we can consider empowerment as a process by which women develop their capacity to act as agents in both personal and public domains (see Kabeer, 2005, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 1994). In fact, women's empowerment has been broadly defined in the existing literature as a non-linear, cyclical process that involves a change of power relations. In the following section, I will review the ways in which women's empowerment is conceptualised as a dynamic process that derives inspiration from the aforementioned power models.

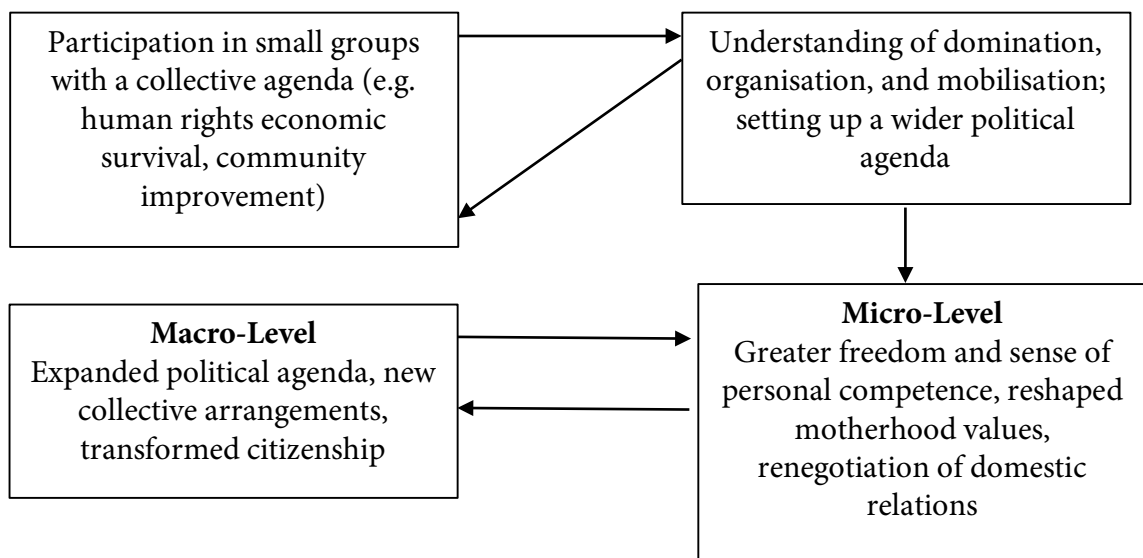
## 2.2 Women's Empowerment as a Dynamic Process: A Proposal for a Communication Approach

To begin, the approach to studying women's empowerment as a multifaceted process adopted by Batliwala (1994) and Stromquist (1995) can be quite helpful in this regard. Stromquist suggests that empowerment is a process that needs to go through a chain of phases at both the micro and the macro level (see Figure 2.1). Although Stromquist draws boundaries between the micro and the macro level, her interpretation of women's empowerment cuts across these two levels. In this respect, Stromquist (1995) proposes that:

[Women's] awareness of conditions at the personal and collective levels will lead to some public action, however small. Following from this beginning there should occur a renegotiation of family conditions. As women become more available for public action, they should be able to place more demands upon the state.

(Stromquist, 1995, p.16)

**Figure 2.1 Stromquist's model of the empowerment process**



**Source.** Stromquist (1995, p.15)

Thus, for Stromquist, women's empowerment is also a process through which the dividing line between the public and the private sphere in women's lives is blurred (see also Yuval-Davis, 1994). In addition, at both the micro and macro levels, Stromquist clearly analyses how women can generate new knowledge to understand their status of subordination and its causes ('cognitive component'), and develop the self-confidence and self-esteem to respond to female stereotypes ('psychological component'). These two elements in turn need to be strengthened with collective action ('political component'), as collective action is 'fundamental to the aim of attaining social transformation' (Stromquist, 1995, p.15).

In a similar vein, Batliwala's (1994) process of women's empowerment also includes women's recognition of the ideology of male domination, and the organisation of collective action to challenge women's subordination. But Batliwala (1994) goes one step further to stress the 'spiral' aspects of women's empowerment process:

The process of empowerment is thus a spiral, changing consciousness, identifying areas to target change, planning strategies, acting for change, and analysing action and outcomes, which leads in turn to higher levels of consciousness and more finely honed and better executed strategies. The empowerment spiral affects everyone involved: the individual, the activist agent, the collective, and the community. Thus, empowerment cannot be a top-down or one-way process.

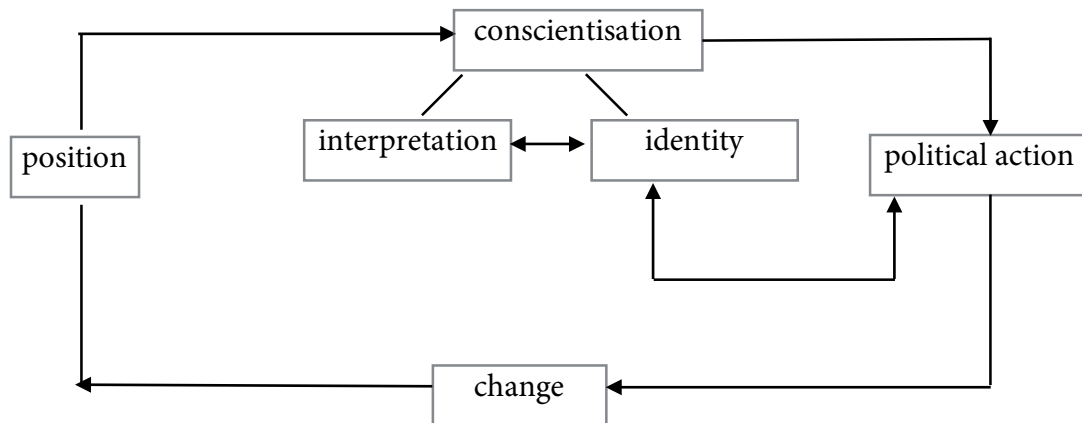
(Batliwala, 1994, p.132)

Furthermore, Batliwala (2007) explicitly points out that empowerment is 'a *socio-political process*' to bring about 'shifts in political, social, and economic power between and across both individuals and social groups' (p.559; emphasis in origin).

Moreover, from feminist perspectives, Carr (2003) stresses a *cyclical* process of women's empowerment by putting her analysis into a matrix of social, historical, and political contexts. For Carr, the process starts from women's understanding of their *position* of being powerless, oppressed, or deprived. Then, women enter into the phase of *conscientisation*, which helps to *mobilise* them to 'connect their experience of oppression with those of other women and thereby see the political dimensions of their personal problems' (Carr, 2003, p.15). As such, both *conscientisation* and *mobilisation* tend to

result in *political action* and change. At the same time, the *conscientisation* process motivates women to have their own *interpretation* of how to break from the patriarchal ideology, and helps in the construction of both individual and group *identity*. The diagram below presents a summary of the model.

**Figure 2.2 Carr's model of the cyclical processes in the empowerment of women**



**Source:** Carr (2003, p.14)

The identification of these mechanisms show that women's empowerment is a dynamic process whereby individual and collective actors produce generative senses of 'power to' (including 'power from within'), and 'power with' to change gender inequalities. Moreover, such process-oriented analyses implicitly assume that women's empowerment encompasses both individual and collective aspects, as well as complex interrelations between individual and collective empowerment (see also Allen, 2005). Yet, what still remains unclear is *how* women actors exploit the potential to generate power to bring about both personal and social change.

To approach this problem, I suggest that there is a need to place communication at the centre of the issue in order to conceptualise the open-ended process of women's empowerment. In the process of challenging gender-related structural constraints, the communicative dimension of empowerment is indeed not new and has been noted by a number of scholars. Papa et al. (2000), for instance, advanced the view that *empowerment is fundamentally a communicative process*. Others, often from feminist perspectives,

frame women's empowerment as being constituted by a set of communicative practices in pursuit of both individual and collective goals (e.g. Buzzanell, 1994; Rappaport, 1995; Surrey, 1991; I. M. Young, 1994; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Specifically, it is through communication that female actors recognise their subordinate status, raise consciousness, express their standpoint, make decisions, participate in actions, build solidarity, and organise collective action.

## **2.3 Rethinking Women's Empowerment as a Communication Phenomenon**

Based on the previous discussion, I begin with the assumption that women's empowerment is a communicative process that challenges existing systems of domination. In what follows, I will outline a set of propositions to explain how the interactive processes of women's empowerment take place, and how communicative practices shape these.

### **2.3.1 Developing Women's Consciousness through Voice**

The above discussion on women's empowerment as a process seems to underline the importance of consciousness-raising as the point of departure. A possible explanation in this regard might relate to the fact that the concept of empowerment has roots in Paulo Freire's theory of 'conscientisation' in the field of popular education. Citing Freire, Thompson (2007) notes that conscientisation refers to the process of 'raising people's awareness of how problems experienced often have much to do with wider social and political issues relating to the structure of society' (p.22). In this respect, Freire's notion of conscientisation also 'provides a bridge between individual and collective empowerment' (Adams, 2008, p.52). Hence, when it comes to women, conscientisation suggests that 'women can connect their experiences of oppression with those of other women and thereby see the political dimensions of their personal problems' (Carr, 2003, p.15).

Indeed, feminist scholars have been ahead of many others in academia in acknowledging the significance and effect of conscientisation, or consciousness-raising in their terms. This is because this concept has widely been used during the second wave feminism (1960s-1980s) in order to 'raise the consciousness of women about sexist

oppression in the power structure of society and about the use of political means to eradicate it' (Lindsey, 2015, p.155). In this sense, women's consciousness of their subordinate position has the potential to lift them out of oppression and even to transform patriarchal structures (see Allen, 2008; Hurwitz & Taylor, 2012; Papa et al., 2000).

This approach in incorporating consciousness-raising into women's empowerment is particularly elaborated by the strand of development psychology from the perspective of development feminists. For example, Gutiérrez (1990) concentrates on specific communicative actions individual women can take to gain mastery and to improve their life circumstances, such as interacting with other powerless women to develop a collective consciousness of the unjust socio-political environment (p.146; see also Gutiérrez, 1994). Zimmerman (1995) focuses on individual women's perception of their own ability to make decisions and to control their own destiny through self-reflection on the disempowering beliefs embedded in their personal lives. For Shields (1995), the conscientisation-oriented process of women's empowerment unfolds in interrelated phases: the emergence of an internal sense of self, the ability to take actions of choice and control based on the internal self, and an active engagement in their lives.

In this respect, the communicative action of voice can play an important role in the process of 'conscientisation' for both individual and group actors. Through the lens of women's empowerment, voice refers to 'the different ways in which women might seek, individually or collectively, to bring about desired forms of change in their lives and relationships' (Kabeer, 2010, p.107). Women's capacity for voice is thus closely related to the communication processes through which women can express their concerns and make decisions.

The first key element inherent in the communicative action of giving voice is storytelling, which is central to an understanding of women's empowerment. According to Plummer (2001), life stories, alongside autobiographies and narratives, can be important in helping to reveal how 'people get through their days making decisions about what can be done through telling stories of their moral choices which are embedded in their lives and their environments' (p.248). This capacity for storytelling will in turn enable women to reflect on their ways of living and ask whether helpful changes can be



made according to their choices. Hence, the core value of storytelling lies in an individual's heightened awareness of their life changes that actualise the notion of women's empowerment.

In this regard, Giddens' (1991) work on 'the reflexive project of the self' provides another useful entry point. Following Giddens, both individual women and women's groups continuously work on their biographical narratives to construct unique identities coupled with their changing understandings of structure, ideology, and institutionalised patterns of practices (see also Buckingham, 2008; Elliott, 2014; Gauntlett, 2008). When conceptualised this way, women's empowerment can be viewed as a communicative process through which either individual or group actors develop awareness of the existing set of power arrangements so that they can define and develop their own standpoints in reaction to these unequal social relations (Collins, 2000, pp.291-293).

This links well with the notion of self-expression to develop our understanding of women's empowerment further. In this sense, self-expression involves the process through which women have their views heard and achieve personal change. As Papacharissi (2010) notes, 'self-expression values are connected to the desire to control one's environment, a stronger desire for autonomy, and the need to question authority' (p.134). These values are aligned with, as Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) argue, 'ultimately a deep sense of empowerment' (p.370).

In addition, the capacity for voice helps to build bridges between women's individual and collective empowerment. This can be found particularly in the work of Rappaport (1995), who argues that 'the goals of empowerment are enhanced when people discover, or create and give voice to, a collective narrative that sustains their own personal life story in positive ways' (p.796). Underlying this point is the recognition that 'communities, organisations, and individual people have stories, and that there is a mutual influence process between these community, organisational, and personal stories' (Rappaport, 1995, p.796). It is therefore that 'people who seek either personal or community change often find that it is very difficult to sustain change without the support of a collectivity that provides a new communal narrative around which they can sustain changes in their own personal story' (Rappaport, 1995, p.796). Again, this reinforces the assumption that

through the process of 'power with', the sense of 'power to' and 'power from within' can be further increased.

The notion of voice further links well with the concept of dialogue. By drawing on various perspectives from communication studies, Ganesh and Zoller (2012) identify that dialogue can be viewed as 'a special form of mutual relationship building and collaboration' (p.70). This is also alluded to in studies of development communication, suggesting that dialogue is 'the route to self-reflection, self-knowledge, and liberation from disempowering beliefs', as well as 'the route to mutual learning, acceptance of diversity, trust, and understanding' (Papa et al., 2000, p.94). Moreover, if we examine dialogue from feminist perspectives, this form of communication would eschew 'persuasion, which is associated with patriarchal attempts at domination and control' (Ganesh & Stohl, 2013, p.70). In light of this, dialogue can help women to establish 'mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships' (Surrey, 1991, p.164).

A similar point is used by Yuval-Davis (1994) to place dialogue as central in the building process for women's empowerment. For Yuval-Davis, dialogue can help those women who participate in feminist politics to recognise and interpret their 'internalised oppression' in order to create successful alliances. Consequently, 'empowerment has been constructed as a process which breaks the boundaries between the individual and the communal' (Yuval-Davis, 1994, p.194). Iris Young (1994) goes further by adopting the notion of dialogue to interpret empowerment:

I define this meaning of empowerment as a process in which individual, relatively powerless persons engage in dialogue with each other and thereby come to understand the social sources of their powerlessness and see the possibility of acting collectively to change their social environment.

(I. M. Young, 1994, p.50)

Underlying this point is a necessity of a more participatory, dialogical, non-directive, and horizontal communication space in which all 'powerless' women in a group could have a conversation with each other so as to promote a collective sense of consciousness-raising (see White, 2004).

### 2.3.2 Constructing a Public Identity

The foregoing analysis draws our attention to the communication processes with which women become aware of their subordinated position and thus form a collective consciousness, which deepens their sense of empowerment. In this respect, it is important to point out that these processes occur in the context of social relations. Thus, the processes of women's empowerment also involve the construction of public identities through which both individual and group actors can produce a desired impact on others (see Buckingham, 2008; R. Jenkins, 2008; Lister, 2003; Papa et al., 2000).

This social interactional perspective is indeed indebted to Erving Goffman's (1959) work on the presentation of self and everyday life. Goffman develops a 'dramaturgical' approach by looking at the ways in which individuals perform roles and adopt strategies of impression management, within specific social settings, to produce a public image to others and to be seen in a favourable light (Buckingham, 2008; Elliott, 2014; R. Jenkins, 2008; Lindsey, 2015).

In relation to women's empowerment, the issue of performance is very relevant to the ways in which women produce their subjective self through social practices within a cultural framework. It is worth noting here that while cultural norms modify women's social interactions, they do not determine them. Instead, individual women do not merely draw from, but *transcend*, gendered roles and norms to manage the self-impressions given to other participants in the interaction, which contributes to the development of a creative and reflexive identity (Brickell, 2005, p.30; Elliott, 2014, p.38). Meanwhile, in line with Goffman, the construction of women's identities is more than an internal matter and implies a relational and reflexive process.

Extending these insights to the organisational context, Goffman's theory of the 'presentation of self' relates to the display of a group image, wherein official representatives generate information to produce a group identity (Kavada, 2012, p.33). This group identity in turn is used to make connections with supporters to form a collectivity. In light of this, group actors need to take part in the identification process to influence the public reception of their self-image, which could play a role in the processes of mobilisation, recruitment, and assimilation. In this respect, Goffman's concept of

framing (1975) can help us to understand how groups use schemata to 'strategically craft their messages so that they have the widest impact or present events in the best possible light' (Johnston, 2009, p.3). In other words, group actors are 'actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders and observers' (Snow & Benford, 1992, p.136). Hence, a group frame can 'guide participants' interpretations of what needs to be changed, how to do it, and why' (Johnston, 2014, p.17). As such, from the vantage point of group actors, identity projection can be also seen as a key component in the processes of women's empowerment.

### **2.3.3 Organising Collective Action**

At this point, it is worth noting that while the previous sections have already noted that empowerment is a communicative process in nature, we still know relatively little about how women are engaged in collective endeavours to challenge patriarchy through specific communicative actions. As argued already, collective empowerment can produce a more profound impact than individual action. This is why we need to draw on collective action theory, particularly from an increasingly-recognised strand in this field which emphasises communication (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012, 2013; Bimber et al., 2012; Bimber et al., 2009; Flanagin et al., 2006; Kavada, 2011, 2014, 2015; Mische, 2003). This line of enquiry is also premised on the assumption that *in nature, collective action is a communicative phenomenon*. This is particularly evident in the writing of Flanagin et al. (2006) who 'reframe collective action as being constituted by *a set of communication practices* involving the crossing boundaries from the private to the public realm' (p.32; emphasis added). For the purposes of the study, I draw my attention to women's organisations, and, in what follows, I will discuss how group actors manifest the processes of empowerment through specific communicative actions.

The central role that women's organisations play in the empowerment process has been well documented. Since the mid-1980s, development feminists who study women's empowerment have put great emphasis on the role of women's organisations and their intervention to help disempowered women as a group (Batliwala, 1994; Stromquist, 1995). This position is particularly inspired by Sen and Grown's (1987) seminal work

*Development, Crisis, and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. In this book, Sen and Grown clearly identify 'the creation of women's organisations as central to the design and implementation of strategies for gender transformation' (Stromquist, 1995, p.13). What is more, as suggested already, women's empowerment in terms of 'power with' has a close affinity with the women's movement, which is 'remarkable for the number of organisations that it generates and maintains' (Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p.42).

Traditionally, women's groups/organisations are characterised by hierarchical leadership and professionalism attempting to influence policy (see Bimber et al., 2012; Bimber et al., 2009; della Porta & Diani, 2006; Pelak et al., 1999; Thompson, 2007; White, 2004). Nevertheless, under the influence of globalisation and the appearance of new gendered meanings and practices, a wide variety of women's organisations with informal, decentralised structures have emerged (Hurwitz & Taylor, 2012; Pelak et al., 1999). These new organisations, according to Bimber et al. (2009), have 'few organisational levels, simple management and coordination structures, and yet have large memberships that exert considerable political power' (p.76; see also Pelak et al., 1999).

It is worth bearing in mind that these two main types of organisational structure for women's organisations co-exist and play different roles in the empowerment process. Sometimes, the boundaries between these two organisational structures are blurred. For instance, some empirical studies have clearly shown that bureaucratic organisations have realised the importance of transformation in response to environment shifts, and new women's groups, at the same time, are willing to become more formally organised to achieve common goals (Bimber et al., 2012; Pelak et al., 1999, p.158; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005, p.41). This tendency is also evident in China, where both party-led government agencies on women's issues and new autonomous women's groups are loosely connected by informal coalitions and alliances to engage in common actions for change in relation to gender-related inequalities (see Chapter 4).

The core value of women's organisations, from a collective action perspective, lies in their ability to generate and maintain the women's movement (Staggenborg, 2002; Staggenborg & Taylor, 2005). This is because organisations play a critical role in constructing issues, which leads to powerful sources of identity for a movement's own

constituency (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.137; Ganesh & Stohl, 2013, p.6). Subsequently, organisations become important actors to persuade potential participants to join in, make an effort, and to remain, as well as manage and coordinate their contributions and resources (Bimber et al., 2009, p.75; Kavada, 2011). In this manner, as Bimber et al. (2012) observe, organisations are the 'central coordinating mechanisms through which individuals recognise and assess their mutual interests, create and sustain motivation to contribute to these shared visions, and develop ways to act together' (p.78). Thus, as della Porta and Diani (2006) put it, 'organisations are an important source of continuity [of a movement], not only in terms of identity, but also in terms of action' (p.138).

This process also involves the negotiation. This is because, to challenge male-dominated structure, not only do women's organisations have their own standpoints, but involved participants also have their own as well. Thus, one process vital to an organisation is the learning gained from its members' perceptions, opinions, and viewpoints for joint agenda setting, so that both organisations and individuals have a clearer idea about what they are going to achieve (Papa et al., 2000; Thompson, 2007). For Ganesh and Zoller (2012, p.70), this can be viewed as a collaborative form that contributes to a deepened sense of connection. In addition, negotiation is helpful in managing tensions surrounding difference, as 'conflicts of interest, perspective and direction are [a] basic part of human existence' from a more realistic perspective (Thompson, 2007, p.43). In this respect, negotiation is an essential element for the effective development of 'power with' relations that can fulfil the potential of 'working together' in the empowerment process.

At the same time, in practice, it is rare for a single or dominant organisation to challenge the unjust power structures of a society. In fact, it is a network of multiple organisations emerging from inter-organisational collaborations and coalitions that work together for social change (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Diani, 2003, 2011, 2013; Johnston, 2014). Such inter-organisational relationships rest explicitly on communicative interaction between groups and organisations in pursuit of common goals (della Porta & Diani, 2006; Diani, 1992, 2003, 2004, 2011, 2013; Diani & Bison, 2004).

Accordingly, we can identify two types of relationships that have significant implications for how one can understand inter-organisational ‘power with’ and their potential connection with the empowerment process. This first one is associated with the *interactional processes of organisational resources* that can be valued and measured objectively, including money and members (see Ackland & O’Neil, 2011, p.179). In this respect, the ties between organisations might lie in the exchange and pooling of mobilisation resources, joint membership, or shared personnel (Diani, 2003, p.10). As such, ‘power with’ in this sense is a process in which participant organisations ‘instrumentally share resources in order to achieve specific goals’ (Diani & Bison, 2004, p.286), but such ‘alliances are not backed by strong identity links’ (Diani & Bison, 2004, p.285). In other words, all instances of organisations merely produce a signal to the public that that are fighting against the same cause.

The second refers to the *interaction processes of organisational issues* that reflect mutual recognition of the desired outcomes and goals, leading to a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ (see Ackland & O’Neil, 2011, p.179). In this respect, the ties between organisations might be activity/project collaborations and cooperation, joint participation in public events, or exchanges of information (Diani, 2003, 2013). All these activities facilitate inter-organisational connections with an increased recognition of a common purpose and shared commitment to a cause (Diani & Bison, 2004, p.284). In light of this, ‘power with’ can be viewed as a process in which organisational actors produce a strong signal that they share similar values, beliefs, and ideas.

More often, however, a model of ‘networks of organisation’ is characterised by ‘the independence of the single components, horizontal integration, flexibility in goals and strategies, and multiple levels of interaction with the possibility of communitarian elements’ (della Porta & Diani, 2006, p.159). When applied to women’s empowerment, networks of organisations allow us to combine insights from the two propositions introduced above. They facilitate alliance-building based on the *interaction processes of organisational resources* on the one hand, and, at the same time, foster the diffusion of ideas and practices based on the *interaction processes of organisational issues* (see Diani, 2011, p.226).

Based on the foregoing discussion, I propose that women's organisations – as important loci for the formation of women's collective empowerment – can be viewed in two complementary ways. Firstly, they serve as communicative sites where prospective individual participants can be engaged in the 'power with' process and, secondly, they have the capability to network with peer organisations to extend the 'power with' to the inter-organisational level. Both of these two dimensions make a contribution to the construction of a collectivity in terms of organising processes to bring about changes to existing structures of power.

## **2.4 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has attempted to present the first elements of a theoretical framework for the consideration of women's empowerment as the main goal of my study. I started this chapter by acknowledging that women's empowerment is a multifaceted concept and drawing upon feminist interpretations of power – the core concept of *empowerment* – to anchor this basic perspective. In this respect, I identified three common approaches to power: 'power over', 'power to', and 'power with'. They not only have illuminated the dynamic process of women's empowerment, but also helped to drive our attention to the communicative character of empowerment. I therefore pulled these threads together to develop a framework that conceptualises women's empowerment as a communicative process. In this respect, I integrated some relevant concepts from a broader framework in the social sciences to unravel the dynamic processes in which women's empowerment is aimed at bringing about social change. Specifically, I outlined three aspects that have helped to unpack how the communicative action shapes the empowerment process on both the individual and the organisational level, namely development of women's consciousness, construction of a public identity, and organisation of collective action. In these processes, women actors can use the communicative actions of voice, the strategic performance, networking, and coordination to raise their awareness of the existing power arrangements, to express their concerns, to reflect their way of lives, and to participate in organised activities to bring about social change. Yet, what remains unclear is how to apply this conceptualisation of women's empowerment to the field of Internet studies and



how to link the Internet's communication affordances to the main concepts of the framework. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 3   Creating Theoretical Links between the Internet and Women's Empowerment**

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Based on the theoretical proposal of considering women's empowerment as a communication phenomenon in Chapter 2, this chapter attempts to generate a more thorough conceptualisation by examining the role of the Internet in this process. Drawing on the literature from Internet studies, I will investigate the communicative affordances of the Internet for the development of women's empowerment and particularly its role in processes of consciousness-raising, identity projection, personal social networks, as well as the organising of collective action. To offer a solid basis for this enquiry, I will also combine insights from research on the relationship between gender, feminism, and the Internet. To begin, the following section will review the theory around what the Internet is by placing communication in a central position.

### **3.1   What is the Internet?**

The history<sup>1</sup> of the Internet began with ARPANET in 1969 – the world's first advanced computer network to share scientific data set up by the Advanced Research Project Agency of the United States Department of Defence. Yet, at that time, 'no one envisioned that an interpersonal communication medium had been launched' (Baym, 2010, p.13). When email became the world's first 'killer application', the scientists of ARPANET came to realise that the Internet would 'launch a whole new era of computer-mediated communication' (Lievrouw, 2011, p.9). Afterwards, a series of Internet communication services were invented and entered people's everyday lives, including mailing lists, Usenet newsgroups, bulletin board services, Multi-User Domains (MUDs), Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Instant Messaging, and the World Wide Web. All of these developments over the last four decades have altered the ways in which people interact with the world, such as access to information, patterns of association, everyday experiences, organisational behaviour, and political action.

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<sup>1</sup> The intention here is not to cover the entire history of the technological development of the Internet. For a detailed account in this regard, see Castells (2001, pp.9-35), Chadwick (2006, pp.38-48), Livingstone (2005), and Curran (2012, pp.34-65).

Nowadays, the Internet has become more than simply an information and communication technology (ICT); it has developed into a 'symbolic form' to mediate human communication (see Macnamara, 2014). In light of this, a key question arises: how has the Internet transformed from a technology to a 'symbolic form' and redefined the nature and organisation of communication systems? In other words, where does the communication power – borrowing a term of Manuel Castells (2009/2013) – of the Internet come from?

To begin this analysis, it is very important to note that the Internet in the present study is considered as a core medium, or an instance, in today's communication media environment. I will not address its 'new media' character (Lievrouw, 2011, 2012; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006b; Livingstone, 2005). This is because the Internet is just a 'historical subject' of media, like other conventional forms, since 'all media were once new' (Gitelman, 2006, p.1).

In addition, as Livingstone (2005) suggests, the unitary treatment of the Internet is impossible and misleading due to its diverse collection of technologies, forms and services, all of which warrant specific research regarding their focus. Similarly, Holmes (2005) points out that, given the Internet's history and overuse, it might be better to specify its various sub-media and their individual implications. In light of this, in my study, I have decided to focus on two specific Internet applications; i.e. websites and weblogs. In the meantime, it is worth noting that the single rubric of 'the Internet' has become 'a commonplace part of work, education, leisure, culture and politics', and its ubiquitous use has resulted in its status of 'being taken for granted' (Lievrouw, 2004, p.10). Hence, to avoid any confusion, I have also decided to adopt this 'taken for granted' term - the Internet – for my research.

### **3.1.1 Linking the Internet to Communication**

In simple terms, the Internet is '[an] abbreviation for *internetworking* between multiple computers' (Curran, 2012, p.35; emphasis in origin), or simply points to computer networks. The key to allowing such computer networks to communicate and exchange information freely is the application of the globally agreed protocols and common

standards (i.e. TCP/IP). These technical standards and protocols constitute the open architecture of the Internet system, which make it 'very difficult for any single entity, be it a corporation or a state, to exert decisive control over how and for what purpose the Internet is used' (Chadwick, 2006, p.4). The Internet, in a technical sense, can thus be considered a decentralised *communication system* (Burnett & Marshall, 2003).

This 'network of networks' has been continuously powered by an array of technological innovations, such as digitalisation, broadband, and optical fibre, so as to yield an interactive environment that has never before been available to mass media systems. In such environments, people 'could be connected up in instantaneous, high-speed and multi-data networking', which enables 'constitutively new kinds of interaction that are arguably historically unique' (Holmes, 2005, p.49). In particular, in recent years, the technical capacities of the network allow the Internet to integrate 'messages and codes from all sources, enclosing most of socialised communication in its multimodal, multichannel networks' (Castells, 2011, p.780).

In this respect, the Internet is fundamentally material, being 'in essence complex configurations of "hard" physical components, from cable to code' (Boczkowski & Lievrouw, 2008, p.955). This materiality, *at certain levels*, 'do(es) matter (both literally and figuratively)', since its inherent properties determine 'some of the local conditions of communication amid the broader circulations that at once express and constitute social relations' (Gitelman, 2006, p.10). As Lievrouw (2011) suggests, what materiality emphasises is the ways in which 'material artefacts [...] enable and extend people's abilities to communicate and share meaning' (p.7).

At the same time, people, according to their different needs and desires, can adopt, use, and modify some elements of the Internet's networked properties, as well as make them relatively more centralised and stable over time (Castells, 2009/2013, p.xxvi; Lievrouw, 2011, p.12). This indeed is related to the concept of affordances:

Affordances are functional and relational aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them.

(Hutchby, 2001, p.444)

In terms of the Internet, we can say that it is the horizontal, decentralised, and open properties of the embodied networked architecture that *afford* people a variety of possibilities for action. Nevertheless, it is worth keeping in mind that ‘it is not the latent affordances of a technology that really matter to social explanations; it is how people *leverage* technological affordances that counts’ (Earl & Kimport, 2011, p.32; emphasis added). In other words, the technological affordances of the Internet ‘are not reducible to their material constitution but are inextricably bound up with specific, historically situated modes of engagement and ways of life’ (Bloomfield et al., 2010, p.415). Thus, the Internet is both shaped by and shaping people’s social practices (see Baym, 2010; Buckingham, 2008; Dutton & Graham, 2014; Papacharissi, 2010; Wajcman & Jones, 2012).

Furthermore, the extent to which people leverage the affordances of the Internet depends on culture, social arrangements, and organisational forms (Boczkowski & Lievrouw, 2008; Castells, 2009/2013; Lievrouw, 2011; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006a). For Silverstone (2005), this is a process of ‘mediation’, which:

... is a fundamentally dialectical notion which requires us to address the processes of communication as *both institutionally and technologically* driven and embedded. Mediation, as a result, requires us to understand how processes of communication change *the social and cultural environments* that support them as well *the relationship that participants*, both individual and institutional, have to that environment and to each other. At the same time, it requires a consideration of the social as in turn a mediator: institutions and technologies as well as *the meanings* that are delivered by them are mediated in the social processes of reception and consumption.

(Silverstone, 2005, p.189; emphasis added)

In this sense, the Internet can be considered an ‘outcome of an intricate interplay among technological, cultural, and social factors at historically specific points in time’ (Löwgren & Reimer, 2013, p.14).

Gitelman's (2006) broader definition of media represents a valuable addition to this strand, which can be used to investigate the relationship between technology, people, and society within contemporary communication ecology. As she writes,

I define media as socially realised structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualised collocation of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation.

(Gitelman, 2006, p.7)

In this sense, the Internet is more than simply a technological shift in media, as Gitelman's (2006) proposal sheds light on 'a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships' (p.7). According to Macnamara (2014), these 'protocols' or social and cultural practices reframe the social shaping process of the Internet, and define the Internet's socially situated identity and use.

In summary, the Internet is not merely a technology that mediates the communication of the human experience by offering new communicative practices. Rather, the Internet has developed into a broader communication phenomenon wherein people reconfigure ways to organise the social system through leveraging the Internet's inherent affordances. In other words, the key to understanding the Internet is in terms of the dialectical relationship it facilitates between people and technology; that is, the ways in which people make use of the material features of the Internet for their communicative practices and social activities.

### **3.1.2 The Internet, Communication, and Genre**

As mentioned earlier, while it is erroneous to refer to the Internet as a single thing, it is impossible to define the 'taken-for-granted' Internet with precision. Yet, alternatively, we can treat the Internet as an entity that includes 'very particular sites for very particular, importantly social as well as historically and culturally specific experiences of meaning' (Gitelman, 2006, p.8).

The concept of 'genre' can be useful here in its representation of 'typified communicative actions characterised by similar substance and form and taken in response to recurrent situations' (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992, p.299). In other words, 'a genre may be identified by its socially recognised *purpose* and shared characteristics of *form*' (Yates et al., 1999, p.84; emphasis added). In particular, as Lievrouw (2011) observes, the concept of genre has had a long history in the study of communication; indeed, 'since the 1990s, scholars have looked at various types of online communication as genres, including email, personal websites, FAQ pages, blogs, and online newspapers' (p.20).

For the purpose of this study, I offer a brief look at two identifiable genres on the World Wide Web: websites and blogs. According to Foot and Schneider (2006), an individual website constitutes a set of features, links, and texts, which gradually develop as genre 'markers' for both users and producers. For instance, some websites carry a familiar set of features to traditional media (e.g. documents, FAQ, meeting minutes), while others take advantage of hypertext links and the interactive features of new media (Crowston & Williams, 2000). On the other hand, based on the work of Herring et al. (2005), blogs have been widely accepted as a genre of communication, consisting of frequent, relatively brief postings arranged in reverse chronological order. In addition, they are usually 'written by individuals and present an individual's subjective view of their life or a particular topic' (Rettberg, 2014, p.34).

Therefore, based on the foregoing discussion, central questions arise: how can women use the Internet to tackle the issue of unequal power relations? And, in this process, what forms of empowerment can women experience? These issues constitute the main focus of the following sections.

### **3.2 Feminist Critique of Power: Rethinking the Theoretical Basis of Women's Empowerment in the New Communication Environment**

While the Internet has experienced dramatic technological development since the late 1980s and early 1990s, feminist theorists have also grasped this opportunity to enquire about whether women can become empowered by the Internet. Until now, as Mann (2014) notes, many feminist scholars in the context of the new media age have turned their

attention to the Internet's 'potential to undermine hierarchies of authority and power' (p.294). Thus, to investigate the role of the Internet in the processes of women's empowerment, power is once more the key question. In what follows, by drawing on theories from Internet studies, I will revisit the three power models (i.e. 'power over', 'power to', and 'power with'), which have been widely accepted as the theoretical basis of women's empowerment (see Chapter 2), and their relationship with the Internet.

### **3.2.1 'Power over': A Reflection of the Real-World Power Hierarchy**

In the early 1990s, feminist analyses in general prioritised a pessimistic approach to discussing the very processes by which the Internet was designed as a male technology, and one by which men still exerted power *over* women (see van Zoonen, 1992; van Zoonen, 2002; Wajcman, 2000, 2004; Wilding, 1998a). The basic logic behind this assertion derives from the Internet's 'roots in the so-called military-industrial complex' (van Zoonen, 2002, p.6), as the ARPANET – the precursor of the Internet – was originally designed by male engineers and scientists for military purposes (previously mentioned in Section 3.1). In addition, many feminists acknowledged that the Internet had been continuously produced and used in patriarchal society, simply because men dominated the technological development of the Internet (van Zoonen, 1992, 2002; Wajcman, 2000). In this respect, it is no surprise that feminist researchers claim that the Internet is inevitably imbued with masculine codes and values, and that it is essentially a patriarchal technology.

This tendency is particularly evident, for instance, in ecofeminist thinking. Fundamental to this strand is the idea that 'women are closer to nature than men, and that technology in its present form is a result of men's desire to dominate and exploit nature in the same way as they dominate women' (van Zoonen, 1992, p.15). This results in a dichotomy in relation to gender stereotypes: men/masculinity are paired with technology, while women/femininity with nature (van Zoonen, 1992; Wajcman, 2004). Indeed, women's absence from the technological spheres, as Wajcman (2000, pp.450-452) argues, reflects the hierarchy of gender power relations wherein women are the passive victims of technology.



Furthermore, as computer-mediated communication (CMC) began to flourish in the late 1990s, (e.g. email, discussion lists, newsgroups, instant messaging, MUDs, etc.), more women started to learn about the communicative practices afforded by these new applications. Nevertheless, there is enough empirical evidence about gender inequalities between men and women on the Internet, especially in terms of discourse and linguistic style (for an overview, see van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009). In general, the findings show that apologetic, polite, and communicative language patterns are typical for feminine discourse, while argumentative, assertive, and even rude and aggressive patterns are used for masculine discourse (van Zoonen, 2002, p.12). Moreover, in a 'mixed gender' online environment, men take control of the communicative practices. For example, women post fewer messages and receive fewer responses (Herring, 2003). This, again, reflects that real-world power hierarchies in relation to gender are carried over into the online domain. In addition, as Herring (2003) observes, 'culturally-stereotyped gender roles and interests are also reflected in Web usage patterns' (p.215). As such, women are typically the targeted consumers of online shopping and entertainment rather than the users of news, politics, and sports. Hence, once more, this 'persistence of gender disparity in online contexts [...follows] the same hierarchy that privileges males over females offline' (Herring, 2003, p.218).

These stereotyped codes of femininity still cast a shadow over feminists who use the Internet to speak in public or participate in social affairs, as it is commonplace for them to experience attacks, harassment, verbal abuse, or hate speech in online spaces. As Herring et al. (2002) observe, 'when women gather online, and especially when they attempt to discuss feminism, they are not uncommonly the target of negative attention from individuals, mostly men, who feel threatened by or otherwise uncomfortable with feminism' (p.373). These men generally write as 'trolls' to provoke or undermine feminists. This tendency has become even worse in modern social media, as feminists, as well as their networks, can be easily identified and can receive hostile responses from 'trollers' (Cole, 2015). In some cases, feminists might choose to quit or keep silent in order to stop this disruption, which in turn reproduces the discrimination they face in the real world.

Occasionally, if they stand up to fight against ‘trolling’, their privacy and safety can be at risk.

Thus, ‘power over’ still works in the new communication environment, as well as reinforces the stereotypical dichotomy between men and women. In other words, the Internet, if viewed from the perspective of a male-dominated technology, can become a new source of women’s oppression and will reconfirm real-world ‘power over’ relations.

### 3.2.2 Opportunities for ‘Power to’

On the other hand, many radical feminists, or more precisely, cyberfeminists, have adopted a utopian approach to exploring the relationship between new technologies that centre around the Internet and transgressions of patriarchal culture. An Australian feminist collective – VNS Matrix – whose members use artistic works to express their strong desire to reconfigure a masculine cyberculture with feminist interventions, or even to recreate a ‘women-only’ cyberspace, firstly coined the term ‘cyberfeminism’ in 1991<sup>2</sup>. In 1994, Sadie Plant began to officially adopt the term to describe ‘the work of feminists interested in theorising, critiquing, and exploiting the Internet, cyberspace, and new-media technologies in general’ (Consalvo, 2003, p.108). Fierce debate on cyberfeminism soon peaked in the First Cyberfeminist International in Kassel, Germany, in 1997, but nevertheless ‘dissipated somewhat after the turn of the millennium, despite a continued interest in gender-based critiques of technoculture’ (Barnett, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> The founding members of VNS Matrix are four Australian women: Josephine Starrs, Julianne Pierce, Francesca da Rimini, and Virginia Barratt. They used a variety of artistic practices, such as computer games, video installations, exhibitions, posters, texts, and billboards, to engage in the feminist art movement, as well as to develop a feminist intervention into the then called ‘military-industrial-imperial’ technological environment. In their iconic *Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, they clearly stated that: ‘We are the modern cunt [...] we see art with our cunt we make art with our cunt [...] we are the virus of the new world disorder/rupturing the symbolic from within/saboteurs of big daddy mainframe/the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix [...] terminators of the moral codes [...] we are the future cunt’ (<http://www.sterneck.net/cyber/vns-matrix/index.php>). For more information on the history of VNS Matrix see <http://motherboard.vice.com/read/an-oral-history-of-the-first-cyberfeminists-vns-matrix> and <http://www.transmediale.de/content/vns-matrix>.

Whether cyberfeminism is now history or not, it is still one of the key feminist essentials to connect women's practices, experiences, and advancements in new communication technologies. As a promising new wave of post-feminism has appeared, several feminists have expressed their concerns about the relationship between feminism and cyberspace. This group of scholars are represented by Donna Haraway, Faith Wilding, Sadie Plant, Radhika Gajjala, and Anna Munster, to name but a few. According to one of the most commonly held descriptions of the term:

Cyberfeminism as a philosophy has the potential to create a poetic, passionate, political identity and unity without relying on a logic and language of exclusion or appropriation. It offers a route for reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology rather than on factors which are divisive. [...] Cyberfeminism does not accept as inevitable current applications of new technologies which impose and maintain specific cultural, political and sexual stereotypes. Empowerment of women in the field of new electronic media can only result from the demystification of technology, and the appropriation of access to these tools. Cyberfeminism is essentially subversive.

(Paterson, 1998).

In this respect, cyberfeminism describes an 'incredible confluence of women's ground-breaking involvement in digital media technologies across theoretical, critical, and activist spheres of feminist influence' (Everett, 2004, pp.1278-1279).

It is furthermore clear that, in the cyberfeminist literature, empowerment of women has become a salient and pressing issue (Gajjala, 1999, 1999-2000; Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 1999). As Gajjala (1999) puts it, 'what all cyberfeminists share is the belief that women should take control of and appropriate the use of cyber-technologies in an attempt to *empower* ourselves' (p.617; emphasis added). In light of this, cyberfeminist theory can set the background for the analysis of the relationship between the previously proposed conceptual framework of women's empowerment and the Internet. However, it is worth bearing in mind that cyberfeminism indicates a noticeable ambivalence around a unified feminist theory and practice in relation to new technologies, so it is perhaps more

appropriate to avoid providing a final definition (Consalvo, 2003; Daniels, 2009; Sundén, 2001; Wilding, 1998b). As such, we can draw on '[cyberfeminism's] defining features' (van Zoonen, 2002, p.12) to open up the vista.

In the first place, cyberfeminist scholars have noted the analogy between women and technology by setting up 'a point of origin from which new values, implicit in new more "female friendly" technologies, emanate' (Munster, 1999, p.120). This is mainly derived from Sadie Plant's work (1996, 1997) on the woman-machine relationship. In Plant's view, femininity is the 'natural' element imbued in new technologies, since their inherently networked, fluid, and changeable structures bear a striking similarity to women's superiority in programming – from weaving to computer processing (see also Munster, 1999; van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009; van Zoonen, 2002; Wajcman, 2004).

This has further raised questions around the empowering role of the Internet, as it seems to produce a non-linear world that cannot be subject to order and control, which, in turn, sets out conditions for the decline of masculine hegemonic power (van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009; Youngs, 2015). As Plant (1996) describes, 'the Internet promises women a network of lines on which to chatter, natter, work and play; virtuality brings a fluidity to identities which once had to be fixed' (p.325). In this sense, Plant's utopian view sheds light on 'power to', as it denotes women's agency and subjectivity in the Internet-based environment, which, at the same time, results in the deconstruction of the military-industrial complex of the technology.

Following cyberfeminist thinking, the Internet can provide more power to those women who are vulnerable to the rigid male-female dichotomy, as they can rely on the Internet to leave their material body behind and engage in an open-ended process of constructing genderless identities (see Sundén, 2001, 2003; van Zoonen, 2002). This bold claim is indebted to Donna Haraway's (1985/1991) theory of the cyborg, referring to 'a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction' (p.146). As Sundén (2001) puts it, underlying Haraway's cyborg is 'a powerful political action that shatters the dichotomous categorisations of Enlightenment epistemology, such as mind/body, organism/machine, public/private, culture/nature, civilised/primitive, *and centrally* man/women, male/female,

masculine/feminine' (p.216; emphasis added). It is therefore that the Internet opens up a new space for women to have disembodied experiences, and ultimately, to gain a renewed sense of self not determined by bodily gender definitions. This also, obviously, suggests a link to 'power to', as the cyborg disembodiment allows women to redefine their feminine subjectivity through an escape from the dichotomy of gender, the blurred boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual', and an exploration of multiple gender identities (Brophy, 2010; Sundén, 2001; Turkle, 1995; van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009; van Zoonen, 2002).

While the transgressive potential of the Internet has implications for women's capacity to enhance their sense of agency and to construct their own identities, it is clear that cyberfeminist theorists in general consider the Internet more as a utopian space. This runs the risk of being reducible to either technological determinism or biological essentialism (van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009). By predominantly relying on the notion of disembodiment, it also seems that cyberfeminism ignores women's uses of the technology in everyday life (Sundén, 2001, p.220; see also van Zoonen, 2002). In addition, cyberfeminist discourse tends to portray a picture that all marginalised women around the world can gain a sense of empowerment through westernised practices of technology use, whereas it neglects localised contexts (Gajjala, 1999, 1999-2000, 2014; Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 1999).

In this respect, currently, many feminist scholars turn to studies of Internet communication and in particular draw attention to participation to extend their insights into power (e.g. Harris, 2008; Hasinoff, 2014; Levina, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shaw, 2014). The power of digital *participation* became evident in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the advent of an array of user-friendly Web platforms that became part of people's daily lives, such as MySpace, Flickr, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. On these platforms, participants have 'relative low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others; some type of informal mentorship', as well as 'believe that their contributions matter; feel some degree of social connection with one another' (H. Jenkins, 2006a, p.7). In this way, each online media platform represented 'a significant step forwards in the ability of citizens to

share, annotate, publish, and remix digital information’ (Delwiche & Henderson, 2013, p.6), which can lead to ‘political, cultural, and economic value’ (Rheingold, 2012, p.111).

Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b) describes these phenomena as indicators of the rise of ‘participatory culture’ in which new media technologies make it possible for ‘common’ people, like producers in the traditional manner, to interact with media content in powerful new ways beyond institutionalised rules and control (see also Deuze, 2006). As such, participatory culture can be seen as ‘a culture populated by people who believe they have some degree of power’ (Rheingold, 2012, p.115). In this respect, the link between participation and power becomes apparent. Rheingold (2012, p.112) also contends that in the digital world, online participation can translate into real power.

Thus, it is no surprise that participation is at the centre of current feminist thinking on how women participate in digital spaces and how they challenge power structures through online participatory practices (see Hasinoff, 2014). Some feminist media scholars go one step further and offer a critical appraisal of the relationship between participation and empowerment. Within such discourses, participation does not simply involve online activities like logging, clicking, writing, commenting, or networking – which is not necessarily empowering. Rather, it involves women’s *unique* participatory practices – in terms of ‘a bodily reaction to flows of information’, and ‘a positioning of subjectivity in experiential relationship’ (Levina, 2014, p.279) – which hold a necessary relationship with empowerment. Underlying these claims is the ‘leverage of user agency’ – that is, how real or actual users interact with the usage inscribed in the engineer’s design of the technology (van Dijck, 2013a, p.33). In the case of my study, this raises questions around to what extent women can leverage technological affordances to empower themselves?

### **3.2.3 Networking and ‘Power with’**

At the same time, cyberfeminist scholars have yet to clearly conceptualise the ways in which the Internet might give new power to networks and organisations so as to work for political action. As Wilding (1998a) observes, in the literature on cyberfeminism, ‘networks and organisations seem somewhat lacking, and the theoretical issues of gender regarding the technosocial are immature relative to their development in spaces of greater

gender equity won through struggle' (p.47). In particular, as Sundén (2001) argues, 'feminist readings of the cyborg do not intend to give us a prescription for how women by mobilising and empowering themselves in collective terms can create a better world' (p.219).

However, it cannot be denied that cyberfeminist scholars have already started to consider this matter, but with implicit assumptions about 'power with'. For instance, Wilding (1998b) questions 'how might cyberfeminists organise to work for a feminist political and cultural environment on the Net?'. Perhaps the most visible example in this regard is the late 1990s' cybergrrl movement wherein technological savvy young girls adopted parodic and ironic devices (e.g. geekgrrls, riotgrrls, Web grrls, guerrilla grrls, etc.) to gain power and authority (see Consalvo, 2003; van Zoonen, 2002; Wilding, 1998b). This incidence implies that cyberfeminism can only inspire us to think of the relations between the Internet and 'power with' in order to transgress a patriarchal system, but it does not address the 'how' aspects of this.

In this respect, the networking affordances of the Internet can provide new insights into the feminist critique of 'power with' relations. It is through networking that women initiate multiple forms of horizontal communication, share information, develop knowledge, establish new identities, interact, and engage in politics. Following Youngs (2004, 2015), all of these possibilities afforded by the Internet are strongly related to inequality and empowerment, especially in the dimension of feminist politics. As Youngs (2004) proposes, 'there are very different kinds of empowerment associated with the Internet. The realm of networking is fascinating and key if we are looking at continuities in feminist politics in these cybertimes' (p.193). Similarly, van Doorn and van Zoonen (2009) observe that 'many women's groups have approached the Internet as an international platform for such diverse goals as creating support networks, challenging sexual harassment, discussing feminist politics, creating spaces for sexual self-expression, and rallying against social injustices' (p.267). An evident trend in this regard is the application of the Internet to women's organising, campaigning, or movements (see also Curran, 2012; van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009; Youngs, 2004, 2015).

### **3.3 Relating Women's Empowerment to the Internet: A Communication Paradigm**

Thinking back to the argument of women's empowerment as a communicative process (see Chapter 2), we can postulate that communication is an important entry point to discuss the relationship between women's empowerment and the Internet. This is also because, as suggested already, the communicative affordances of the Internet, alongside its claimed emancipatory potential, tend to be well suited to a feminist critique of power. Thus, in what follows, I will demonstrate the analytic value of the conceptualisation of women's empowerment, as proposed in Chapter 2, and the role of the Internet in this process through a feminist lens.

#### **3.3.1 Promoting Women's Consciousness through Self-Expression and Storytelling**

Digital media, and the Internet in particular, are helping traditionally rigid boundaries between private and public spaces overlap and encourage people to express their personal concerns in the public domain (Fenton, 2012; Papacharissi, 2009, 2010). Thus, for women, the uniqueness of the Internet also lies in the shifting boundaries between public and private. As Mann (2014) puts it, 'feminist scholars have been ahead of many others in academia in questioning the significance and effect of the divide between public and private' (p.293; see also Youngs, 2004).

Underlying this process is the Internet's potential for self-expression. With the help of the Internet, self-expression, interwoven between online and offline contexts, has become a communicative process in which people can give their private concerns a public presence, expand the public agenda, and share their beliefs and opinions with others through conversational forms (Fenton, 2012; Page, 2012). Furthermore, studies have shown that online self-expression does not simply enable one's voice to be visible or heard by others, but more importantly, cultivates one's capability of self-observation, self-assessment and, ultimately, a better sense of control and autonomy (see Papacharissi, 2010).



This process of self-expression may be particularly valuable for women and, furthermore, women's empowerment. A growing body of evidence has suggested that the expressive affordances of the Internet can be adopted by women as a mediated activity aimed at raising awareness, demonstrating personal beliefs and values, and challenging feminine stereotypes (Harris, 2008). A good example of this is weblogs, which are often perceived as a primary site for women to make their voices heard (Attwood, 2009; Carstensen, 2009; Herring et al., 2005; Lövheim, 2011). This is because weblogs are 'framed by a kind of compulsory individuality, where the "freedom" to express oneself becomes a requirement' (Willett, 2008, p.56). Hence, it is no surprise that blogs have been empirically examined in terms of the potential they offer women to express their thoughts, emotions, and concerns and opinions regarding fashion, sports, love, intimacy and sexuality, as well as to challenge established norms and cultural values (e.g. Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Attwood, 2009; Farrer, 2007; Lövheim, 2011; Rocamora, 2011; Somolu, 2007). In this regard, as Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) notes, 'witnessing the impact of their self-expression, bloggers may not only experience increased psychological well-being but ultimately a deep sense of empowerment' (p.370).

It is also important to recognise that self-expression is linked with what is often referred to recently as digital storytelling, since, on a basic level, the Internet offers a combination of communicative elements (e.g. profiles, posts, comments, bookmarks, hyperlinks, etc.) that allow people to become storytellers in their own right. Within this context, 'stories are small-scale, centring the narrator's own, personal life and experience and usually told in his or her own voice' (Lundby, 2008a, p.2). In other words, the essential components of the stories are 'personal reflections on a subject' (Lambert, 2013, p.37). In light of this, we can see that digital storytelling provides a means to distribute more widely the capacity to reflect both on one's thoughts and oneself (Couldry, 2008). This also suggests that the self can be realised through the process of digital storytelling.

One key aspect of digital storytelling associated with women is the portrayal of their intimate stories in real life. Women's blogs can again be put forward here as an example and, as Muise (2011) puts it, 'online weblogs have become a popular forum for the discussion of sexuality, particularly among women, and have been identified as one

potential “safe space” for the discussion of sexual desire’ (p.411; see also Attwood, 2009). Meanwhile, through intimate/sexual storytelling, weblogs have helped women to become a social, and potentially political, agent. For instance, in a study of women sex bloggers in China, Farrer (2007) finds that the Internet is a key site in which women can constitute themselves as agents with the ability to construct sexual subjectivity and spark fierce debate around sexual rights. At this moment, following the observation of Brickell (2012), it is ‘a matter of empowered becoming’ (p.30).

Based on the above, I propose that the Internet seems to bear considerable potential for women to possess an improved sense of empowerment, especially in terms of the promotion of women’s consciousness through online practices of self-expression and storytelling. The core value in this context is also closely related to the construction of women’s autonomy, as it is already clear that women have become subjects to explore, assess, and realise themselves in the processes of online expression and storytelling.

### **3.3.2 Performance of the Self: A New Source of Power to Control Identities**

In the process of exploring the internal sense of the self in the online realm, people become more aware that their activity is indeed a projection of their personal self-disclosure due to the open architecture of the Internet. This then reminds us about Erving Goffman's (1959) notion of ‘the presentation of self’ (see Section 2.3.2), where writing online for self-reflection can be seen alternatively as a manipulated resource that allows people to think in new ways about the impressions they have ‘given’ and ‘given off’ to the outside world.

From this perspective, the Internet also provides powerful new communication platforms for the exploration of gender, performance, and feminine identities in online contexts. There is some early work, inspired by the cyberfeminist theory of cyborg (see Section 3.2.2), detailing the ways in which women can use the text-based online environment as a playground to experiment with different gender identities regardless of the existence of their physical bodies (e.g. Danet, 1998; Nakamura, 1999; Paterson, 1998; Turkle, 1995). Current work has, in contrast, focused further on the embodiment of women’s everyday experience as an online performance of their gender or sexuality (van Doorn et al., 2007; van Doorn et al., 2008). More recent studies in this field present a

commonly adopted approach to the ways in which women can perform their gendered and sexualised identities, constrained and empowered by the rules of online platforms and the opportunities they offer, as well as in offline contexts (Cover, 2012; Dobson, 2012, 2013; Eklund, 2011; Kapidzic & Herring, 2014; Paechter, 2013; van Doorn, 2010, 2011).

This recent strand comes from the fact that the Internet now has developed into ‘a performative palette that combines multimedia elements with cultural references, elements of play, denotative and connotative expression, and a variety of tools’ (Papacharissi, 2011a, p.307). Within such environments, people, especially those marginalised ones, have come to realise the importance of online self-presentation, as they can have a great opportunity to become visible to others. For these people, ‘the performance of identity and practicing code switching are a matter of survival and a way of life’ (Mann, 2014, p.293). We can advance these important points by noting that the Internet constitutes a new source of power for women to exert control over their identities, which comes very close to realising the Internet’s potential for women’s empowerment.

One way of understanding women’s empowerment through the act of online performance is in their ability to organise an array of symbolic resources (e.g. profiles, photographs, background templates, status updates, tags, hyperlinks, comments, etc.) in order to produce a recognisable self. This process is never stabilised but involves the practices of revising, deleting, and updating, which further reflects women’s enhanced ability to manage the performance of their identities. That said, with the aid of the Internet, women have learned that they can apply the affordances of online storytelling and narratives for self-presentation (see van Dijck, 2013b, p.200). In turn, as Livingstone (2008) points out, ‘elaborating the presentation of self at the node supports the biographisation of the self by prioritising a managed and stylised display of identity as lifestyle’ (p.403). In this respect, identity construction is not only a product of conscious action, but also of a performative act that leads to the co-existence of ‘an “inner” and “outer” subjecthood – a private self and a public self’ (Cover, 2012, p.183). As such, the value of the Internet for women lies in its capability to facilitate the development of social autonomy (see Castells, 2009/2013; Fenton, 2012), which sheds light on the ‘power to’ connotations of women’s empowerment.

In addition, the Internet can provide more power to women who can carefully ‘present an intelligible self with integrity, unification and recognisable coherence’ (Cover, 2012, p.181), as each online communication platform ‘brings along a specific concept of audience’ (van Dijck, 2013b, p.200). The important element here is that, in online contexts, not all audiences are visible and individual participants need to have an imagined sense of audience in their mind to present themselves appropriately (boyd, 2008, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2010; Papacharissi, 2011a). As Marwick and boyd (2010) notes, new media technologies ‘collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation’ (p.117). Following this logic, I suggest that if women can become more aware that they are presenting themselves to multiple audiences, even when they do not have much information about these audiences, they could develop a better sense of their own identities. This may contribute to their sense of ‘power to’ and thus strengthen their empowerment.

Furthermore, scholars have noted the capacity of Web platforms for the promotion of the self and the management of personal reputation, and their potential for public presence and popularity (e.g. Baym, 2010; Chambers, 2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rheingold, 2012; van Dijck, 2013b). This point has been supported by some empirical evidence in relation to women, whereby self-promotion is a crucial aspect for female actors to meet their social needs and interact with the outer world (Bortree, 2005; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2008). In turn, these experiences of integration into public space and the satisfaction of social needs pertain to women’s feelings of competence, confidence, and assertiveness, which subsequently translates into a sense of empowerment (see Stavrositu & Sundar, 2012).

Yet, spectatorship can alternatively become a source of surveillance and limit the Internet’s liberating potential for women to present who they are, especially coupled with the available choices to upload real photographs and leave real names on online platforms. In such contexts, ‘unknown’ audiences may transform into ‘known’ ones, so that some women participants may choose not to display the real self due to social and cultural pressure. As Dobson (2012) observes, some studies – focusing on profiles of social

networking sites – have found that women’s self-presentation, particularly in young women, conforms to and reinforces gender stereotypes. In addition, driven by commercialisation cultures, some women’s self-display of sexy and attractive images caters to male gazers (see also Cammaerts, 2008). This is because, in a commercialised online environment, women’s bodily practices and experiences are often commoditised and objectified (Mann, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2014), a fact that can be considered as potential harmful to women’s empowerment.

### **3.3.3 Capability of Organising Personal Social Networks: Emergence of Social Empowerment**

From the earliest days of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to today’s social networking sites, the Internet has long been documented as a vital ground for the forming of webs of personal connections in everyday life (e.g. Baym, 2010; boyd, 2006; Castells, 2009/2013; Chambers, 2013; Donath & boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2009; Haythornthwaite, 2005; Hodgkinson, 2007; Miller, 2008; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Rettberg, 2014; Rheingold, 1993/2000; van Dijck, 2013b; Wellman, 2001). This is because the open, networked architectural affordances of the Internet become the primary source for people to make a large number of connections between friends, family, work colleagues, vague acquaintances, and even strangers (Donath & boyd, 2004; Ellison et al., 2009; Haythornthwaite, 2005). As Castells (2009/2013) observes, a different kind of sociability has emerged, facilitated by networking on the Internet, wherein both individual and collective subjects have more opportunities to engage in the process of making connections.

This raises questions about another empowering role of the Internet, i.e. the emergence of ‘networked individualism’ – an operating social system proposed by Rainie and Wellman (2012) in which individuals are placed at the centre in their cultivation of personal networks for connection, communication, and information exchange (see also Wellman, 2001). Within this context, each subject is ‘a networked self’ (Papacharissi, 2011b) in the reconstruction of social relationships, the blurring of boundaries between private and public life, and the reconfiguring of the hierarchal system. Although this

approach linking networking and power has been well documented in mainstream new media studies, feminist researchers have not explicitly addressed this aspect.

At the very basic level, writings on the role of the Internet to create connective communication in people's everyday rituals can be helpful here, as these point to participants' enhanced sense of power. This underscores the individual need to be linked in and to feel connected with, as well as in personal control of, multiple forms of interaction (Fenton, 2012). Following this logic, women are capable of developing their own personal networks that are permeable, reflexive, and sparsely connected, moving away from hierarchical control and male dominance.

In addition, there is some emerging work around the ways in which participants can make use of the Internet's communicative affordances to interact with audiences, which is a new and powerful means of reinforcing a sense of belonging in online social networks (Cover, 2012). More specifically, the Internet offers potentials for participants to seek to engage in a constructive dialogue, which in turn facilitates the building of mutual relationships, allies, and collaboration (see Section 2.3.1). This is particularly evident in the use of comments. For instance, Stavrositu and Sundar (2012) suggest that 'via their embedded commenting function, blogs invite readers to enter into dialogue with the bloggers and other readers, leading to the emergence of veritable blog communities' (p.372). No doubt, blogs are only one aspect of various Web platforms that allow users to interact with readers and develop social relationships, which serve as a possible generator of a sense of empowerment (see Barak et al., 2008).

In this regard, interactive mechanisms afforded by the Internet are also of great significance for women's empowerment. In her research on the ways in which commentary occurs between Swedish female-top bloggers and readers, Lövheim (2013a) finds that the Internet helps women to build self-centred social relations regardless of the form of communication (i.e. dialogic or phatic). In other words, although the Internet affords possibilities for readers to leave comments, the power to determine the extent to which female bloggers communicate with readers is still in the hands of bloggers. Thus, once again, the Internet brings improved levels of power and control to women in the

process of constructing social relationships, which is strongly connected to a sense of empowerment.

### **3.3.4 New Dynamics of ‘Power with’ for Women’s Organising and Collective Action**

The possible mechanisms underlying the relationship between the Internet and women’s empowerment discussed so far outline an analytical framework that helps us to understand the ‘power to’ sense of empowerment through digital communication. That said, the communicative affordances of the Internet confer a high degree of autonomy to women who now can engage in an array of activities to express their concerns, preform identities, and manage their personal relationships. To be fair, this individual facet can only present a partial picture of women’s empowerment, as becoming empowered requires more than an enhancement in a sense of agency (see Chapter 2). This section goes beyond women’s experiences of personal empowerment and speaks to the political-collective possibilities brought about by the communicative potential of the Internet for the goal of collective empowerment.

As suggested already, communication has become a central thread running through the ‘power with’ dimension of women’s empowerment and collective action, which is manifest in the processes of constructing common issues, individual engagement and participation, and alliance-building among organisations. This tendency is even more evident with the prevalence of the Internet. Writings on the role of digital communication in collective action can be helpful here, as they can turn our attention to the communicative mechanisms that underlie the development of ‘working together’ – an important means by which to profoundly impact the system of male-domination.

It has been widely documented that collective action in the new communication environment is characterised by diversity, decentralisation, fluidity, and open communication (Fenton, 2007; Kavada, 2010a; van de Donk et al., 2004). This synergy also heralds a new world for feminist movements and activism – a salient aspect of ‘power with’ (see Chapter 2) – as the Internet makes it easier for women to harness ‘disruptive horizontal online activities and varied forms of presence’ (Youngs, 2015, p.861) to extend

the scope of feminist politics (see also Edwards, 2004; Pini et al., 2004; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004; van Doorn & van Zoonen, 2009). In addition, a number of empirical studies have found that the Internet provides many new ways for women, and young women in particular, to be actively engaged in 'micro-politics' and less formal activities on lifestyle issues (Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Schuster, 2013). In addition, growing evidence in support of 'women's alternative media' indicates that new communication media can enable women to produce their own content and reject the biased and stereotyped representation of gender in mainstream media (see Gallagher, 2014; White, 2004). All these cases suggest that the emergence of the Internet has opened up a discursive avenue for women through which to arrive at common understandings of their problems, which in turn might help forge alliances, coalitions and networks based on the common causes resulting from dialogue and knowledge exchange occurring in digital spaces.

In the digital environment, perhaps the most striking aspect of the change has been the emergence of heterogeneous forms of organisations that facilitate women's collaborative work, bonding, and coalition. For instance, existing women's formally-structured groups (e.g. NGOs), through the use and application of ICTs, 'have created elaborate new spaces for women's politics, activism, knowledge, and information-sharing on the Web' (Youngs, 2004, p.194). In addition, the Internet has given a new life to an array of grassroots groups, voluntary organisations, and local networks which operate outside formal political circles (see Curran, 2012; Harris, 2008). As Chadwick (2013) notes, there is also a type of women's 'hybrid organisations' in which the Internet is an integral element.

At the outset, the Internet helps women's organisations to share knowledge in relation to feminism and gender with individuals, which fundamentally reflects their capability to manage problem perceptions and their ways to advance a political agenda for women (Edwards, 2004; Ferree & Mueller, 2004; Pini et al., 2004). Underlying this process is the informing practice afforded by the Internet that allows organisations to disseminate information among site visitors, increase visibility for specific issues, persuade like-minded people, and, ultimately, reach the maximum desired audience (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p.49). In this respect, informing practices constitute the basic step towards a 'power



with' relationship between women's organisations and the audience, as they may have a better understanding of women's status quo within male-dominated social environments.

This is linked with the processes of mobilisation of individuals, in which individual women are organised as collectives in groups, organisations or communities based on a common goal, namely to challenge the patriarchal structure of the social system. In this respect, communicative technologies may act as a catalyst for individual recruitment and mobilisation activities (Foot et al., 2009, p.153; Kavada, 2011, p.8). This is because they make it easier for individuals to find common ground with others who share the same awareness of specific causes.

Furthermore, women's organisations can use the Internet to facilitate the process of interaction between individuals and women's organisations, so as to consolidate the sense of being in a collective. For instance, individuals can affiliate themselves with an organisation by subscribing to their email list, registering as group members, leaving comments on the website, or simply sharing the Web page with their personal networks (see Foot & Schneider, 2006; Kavada, 2011). Meanwhile, women's organisations can engage actively in the production and maintenance of values, causes and cultural trends in association with gender issues to guide their participants as one overall unity. This is because the Internet has the capacity to 'function as a new medium to expose frames and problem definitions and as a space to create shared meanings and identities among the membership and the constituency' (Edwards, 2004, p. 189).

In this respect, it is worth noting that consolidating a collective sense between women's organisations and participants requires different modes of communication – both mediated and unmediated (Kavada, 2010b, 2012, 2013). Drawing on Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) and Flanagin et al. (2006), Kavada argues that mediated practices – based on impersonal interaction – are crucial for people with different opinions to develop a shared position through comments, feedback, and online discussion. On the other hand, unmediated practices – primarily face-to-face interaction – are important for 'the convergence, unity and the affirmation of the collective' (Kavada, 2010b, p.41). Thus, the communicative affordances of the Internet can be expected to reinforce already existing ties and, at the same time, enable contacts to be made between individuals largely

unknown to each other (Bimber et al., 2012; della Porta & Mosca, 2005; Diani, 2000; Flanagan et al., 2006).

In addition, the Internet allows participants to be involved in virtual, ephemeral actions, such as online petitions, memes, or practices of political satire (see Earl et al., 2014; Earl & Kimport, 2011; Yang & Jiang, 2015). These online tactics, according to Earl et al. (2014), are particularly suitable for authoritarian contexts, as they are 'harder for authorities to control and less costly for protesters than street protests' (p.2). Following this logic, the Internet enables women's organisations to mobilise participants into 'flash mobs' to express their concerns, which is also an efficient way to escape the control of government censorship.

Finally, the connective affordances of the Internet allow women's groups to form inter-organisational coalitions and alliances to pursue their political and social aims (see Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Diani, 2011; Fotopoulou, 2014). In this process, organisational actors can form two types of networks; i.e. 'a hyperlink network' and 'a frame network' (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011). In the hyperlink network, women's groups can simply use their websites to connect with each other without exchange of ideas, resources, and information. In this sense, hyperlinks are just a public strategy to signal who are fighting the same cause. On the contrary, in the frame network, it is the 'mutual use of a particular frame component' that links organisations into a network (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011, p.180). In other words, this network of women's groups is built upon 'content', which implies that expansion of connections is not their primary concern (c.f. Donath & boyd, 2004).

### **3.4 Concluding Remarks: Understanding Women's Empowerment in the Internet Age**

The sources of men's power over women – the patriarchal structure, ideological hegemony, and stereotyped cultural values and norms – have not changed fundamentally in the Internet age. This is the social reality in which the unequal distribution of power between men and women is unlikely to be overturned through the use of the Internet, albeit at varying levels. Yet, with the aid of the Internet, women have had a great opportunity to capture various forms of horizontal communication to exercise power in

their living circumstances. This sets the scene for creating possible theoretical links between the Internet and women's empowerment – the core task that this chapter attends to.

The proposed framework of women's empowerment outlined in the previous chapter has helped us to consider a dynamic way in which power is exercised. It also allows us to conceptualise women's empowerment as a communicative process by incorporating this concern into feminist theory using relevant ideas across sociology. In fact, the main advantage of this framework is that it positions communication at the centre, which enables us to analyse more thoroughly the relationship between digital communication and women's empowerment.

Clearly, the foregoing discussion on the possible links between the Internet and women's empowerment, from the vantage point of communication, has not been comprehensive, but it can, nonetheless, be a useful contribution to developing our understanding. From early examinations of feminist accounts of the role of new communication technologies in helping women to claim power and authority, it is clear that they have set the scene for a fuller understanding of the interwoven relationships between technology, society, and female actors. Specifically, they not only shed light on how women exploit the potential of communicative affordances of the Internet to satisfy their needs and desires, but also on how women's leverage of these affordances are shaped by the larger social, cultural, and political contexts.

In line with these perspectives, I have revisited my previously proposed conceptual framework and further investigated how digital communication technologies frame the communicative character of women's empowerment. This process involves a broad range of communicative practices that unfold in online spaces in which women have the capability to recognise the potential of the Internet to create social change. In light of this, it also allows us to rethink key notions in the outlined framework of women's empowerment in Chapter 2, as well as give them new meanings by placing communication in a much more central position. At the same time, it helps us to clarify the dialectical relationship between the Internet and female actors, wherein the Internet

encourages, but does not determine, women's social, cultural and political needs and, ultimately, women's empowerment.

## Chapter 4 Contextual Background: Women, Feminism, and the Internet in China

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The previous two chapters have made attempts to develop a theoretical framework of women's empowerment and to offer insights into the ways in which it is manifest through the Internet. To set the background of this analysis in the context of China, I need to turn my attention to Chinese women, their role in Chinese society, and their use of the Internet. In what follows, I first provide a historical overview of 'what a Chinese woman is' and seek to present a general picture of the changing status of Chinese women. I then explain why the Western discourse of feminism does not work in China and contextualise how the Chinese government and women's organisations work towards women's rights, interests, and problems. A brief account will also be given of how Chinese women – including both individual and organisational actors – use the Internet to achieve their needs, desires, and goals. Finally, I will provide some general background information about the Internet and the characteristics of the Chinese Internet culture.

### 4.1 What is a Chinese Woman?

The notion of a 'woman' in Chinese corresponds closely to four terms when it is used to refer to a female subject, namely *nvren* (女人), *nvzi* (女子), *funv* (妇女), and *nvxing* (女性). This is not to say that these four words are synonymous with each other, although they can all be used as generic categories to describe a collectivity of 'women' in the Chinese language. More often, they are specific terms to reflect the temporality of 'what Chinese women are' in different historical, cultural, and political contexts. As Barlow (2004) notes, the different Chinese terms for women 'make it possible historically to evaluate the richly contingent, composite, or humanly made quality of regulatory concepts and categories' (p.39). It is also worth keeping in mind that these four terms co-exist today and are still in wide use, but with different connotations. In the following, I will look at how definitions of the role of women changed in Chinese society.

#### 4.1.1 Chinese Women in Early Time (Before 1949): A Brief Historical Account

In much of China's history, Chinese women have lived within the framework of Confucian ethics which are essentially masculine, patriarchal, and hierarchical. A key element of this system is the rigid division of labour by gender: a man's role was to earn money outside the home, while women were to ensure domestic harmony. Following this principle, the role of a Chinese woman must be as 'a virtuous wife and a good mother' (*xian qi liang mu*; 贤妻良母), which means that what she needed to do was to obey and support her husband and to bring up their children (see F. Liu, 2014; Schaffer & Song, 2007). More importantly, a woman's obligation was to produce a male heir, as they married into a patrilineal system which served as one of the central features in the Confucian belief system. In this context, Chinese women were commonly called *funv* (妇女) – a term that 'signified the collectivity of kinswomen in the semiotics of Confucian family doctrine' (Barlow, 2004, p.37). Within a Confucian family, the identity of a *funv* (妇女) 'was defined in terms of her unquestioning obedience and deference to the authority of her husband's household at marriage and her eternal attachment to it' (Leung, 2003, p.361), without rights to property inheritance. Apart from these misogynist norms and practices, a Chinese woman could also not show any talents in front of her husband, but was still expected to be obedient to her husband. Yet, the fact remains that 'education, emphasised in Confucianism, was only for males' (F. Liu, 2014, p.19). As an ancient Chinese poem puts it, 'a woman without talent is a virtuous one' (*nv zi wu cai bian shi de*; 女子无才便是德). At this point, *nvzi* (女子) was usually used to refer to a collectivity of 'women without talent', especially unmarried women.

Although this Confucian patriarchal hegemony confined women to the family sphere as a passive self for thousands of years, the question about 'what a Chinese woman is' began to arise in the later years of the nineteenth century. In this period, many Chinese intellectuals had the opportunity to understand neologisms in relation to 'women's rights' from Japan, which undermined Confucian doctrine for women (Ko & Wang, 2006; Sudo & Hill, 2006). This is because the promotion of women's education was central to the then termed 'women's rights' (Sudo & Hill, 2006, p.475). It is also of interest to note that,

in this context, the first women's newspaper – *Chinese Girl's Progress* (*Nv Xuebao*; 女学报 [see Figure 4.1]) – appeared in 1898, aiming to advocate for equal education opportunities between women and men (L. Liu, 2013).

The demand for 'women's rights' reached a peak in the aftermath of the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (1919), through which female intellectuals in urban areas, strongly influenced by Western thought, sought rights to education, economic independence, free choice of marriage, and an end to polygamy and prostitution (Leung, 2003; Schaffer & Song, 2007). Moreover, as Barlow (2004) observes, intellectuals, creative writers, and social activists of the era 'invented the word *nvxing* [女性] in the rhetoric of global sex and eugenics theory' (p.37). In that respect, the term *nvxing* (女性) was linked to women's 'own rational and eugenic notions of gender specificity, bio-social theories of reproduction, instinctual theories of sexuality and social causality' (Schaffer & Song, 2007, p.19). This further targeted the Confucian oppression of women, because what lay behind *nvxing* (女性) was the belief that 'not only did women enjoy natural rights to be mothers, but significantly to pursue romantic love so as to ensure healthier progeny' (Ko & Wang, 2006, p.466).

At the same time, 'what a *new* Chinese woman is' became a fiercely contested issue and a popular topic in the print media. As L. Liu (2013, p.57) notes, many major newspapers and magazines at the time, between the 1920s and 1930s, launched special issues and columns to discuss women's marriage, education, and employment. One good example in this regard is *Ling Long* (玲珑; 'elegant and fine' in English) – a women's magazine published in Shanghai between 1931 and 1937 (see Figure 4.2). The goal of the magazine was 'to promote the exquisite life of women, and encourage lofty entertainment in society'<sup>3</sup> (see also Liu, 2013). The *Ling Long* (玲珑) editors expended great effort in redefining 'modern female style' or 'a new Chinese woman' through the revelations of fashion, beauty, sports health, and marriage.

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<sup>3</sup> See the website at: <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/linglong>.



Figure 4.1 One page of Chinese Girl's Progress (Nv Xuebao; 女学报)

女學報 第二期 西歷一千八百九十八年八月第三號	CHINESE GIRL'S PROGRESS			
	本報主筆 明州沈和卿女史 諸暨丁素清女史 江右文靜芳女史 臨桂廖元華女史 梁溪沈翠英女史 金匱裴梅侶女史 上虞蔣曉芳女史 皖江章曉香女史 南海康文儗女史 邦江雅念劬女史 番禺潘道芳女史 武進劉可青女史 京兆龔慧蘋女史 貴筑李端惠女史 梁溪沈靜英女史 上海潘仰蘭女史	第二期 女學報 敬送	報目 裙釵大會圖 女學報緣起 女學報序 潮州饒平縣隆都前溪鄉女學堂記 韓女游學 美婦從軍	
	大清光緒二十四年歲次戊戌六月中旬			
本館告白				
<p>             一同人創設女學於上海以冀造就開闢人材第學堂一時未能推行各地又續編女學報月出三期每期附錄女學堂事數則其式單張如湘報以便裁訂並每期附圖用端楷繕寫潔白紙料石印俾閱者賞心悅目              一本報為開中國女學風氣起見並非牟利送報一月後每張只取紙料錢三文購者請先惠報費郵費自給函寄上海西門外文元坊本報館查收              一敬懇海內文人閨秀襄茲盛舉各抒所見源源惠寄論說本報微錄一篇敬酬潤筆洋壹圓信資仍請自給              一中國女學書善本甚少本館同人購譯東西洋女學書外又編纂白話淺文諸書以餉海內茲於報尾擬續附女學書一頁先將潘仰蘭所演劉可青所繪中外古今列女傳印出以作巾幗師範之資一本報向意雅三俗七用官話演說一切女學期易於披覽名之曰官話女學報惟主筆各有所見不能一律今定名為女學報云           </p>				

Note. Retrieved from [http://www.wxlib.cn/Item/szzy/mgbk/nxb/nvxb\\_gb.htm](http://www.wxlib.cn/Item/szzy/mgbk/nxb/nvxb_gb.htm).



Figure 4.2 The cover of the first issue of Ling Long (玲瓏)



*Note.* Retrieved from <https://exhibitions.cul.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/linglong>.

#### 4.1.2 Chinese Women in the Mao Era: Between 1949 and 1976

When it came to the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the China's Communist Party (CCP) – as the holder of power – steered the debates about 'new woman', oriented more towards individual advancements, to a patriotic project, by transforming women into part of the national labour force (Evans, 2008; Leung, 2003; F. Liu, 2014; Schaffer & Song, 2007; Wallis, 2006). This is because the Communist ideology of the era believed that 'women's participation in production was both necessary for national development and a prerequisite for improved status' (F. Liu, 2014, p.19). A good example in this regard is Mao's widely quoted slogan: 'Women hold up half the sky' (妇女撑起半边天), which means that whatever male comrades can accomplish, female comrades can also achieve.

While changing female status was still a key concern in the eyes of CCP's officials, they firstly generated a term *funv* (妇女) to replace *nvxing* (女性). The Maoist rhetoric of *funv* (妇女), as Barlow (2004) notes, 'referred to a national subject that stood for the collectivity of all politically normative or decent women' (p.38). This is because the CCP reasoned that the key to emancipating women was to mobilise them into paid work and participation in the processes of building a socialist country. On the other hand, for the CCP, it seems that *nvxing* (女性) 'functioned as negative metaphors for individualist and bourgeois behaviour' and 'suggested possibilities of a sexualised and even consumerist notion of femininity that could not be incorporated within CCP discourse' (Evans, 2008, p.369). In this sense, to distinguish it from the 'Westernised', 'petty bourgeois', 'capitalist' *nvxing* (女性), the term *funv* (妇女) represented Chinese women in the Communist discourse of the time.

Moreover, what lies behind the CCP's creation of *funv* (妇女) is an encouragement for Chinese women to work outside the home and to make an economic contribution to the nation. As Barlow (2004) puts it, *funv* (妇女) 'intertwined directly in state processes over the period of social revolution and social modernisation who, because of her achievements as a state subject, would modernise family practices' (p.38). Hence, the traditionally-rigid division of labour by sex – 'women within and men outside' – was

Figure 4.3 Image of 'Iron Girls' (tie niangzi, 铁娘子)



Note. Retrieved from <http://chineseposters.net/themes/women-working.php>.

removed. Yet, this 'working women' model rendered Chinese women secondary to the nation and forced them to sacrifice their families to instead meet the expectations of collective responsibility.

In addition, to highlight women's roles in the labour force and the relations of these to the liberation of women, the CCP deliberately constructed the image of Chinese women as 'Iron Girls' (*tie niangzi*, 铁娘子; see Figure 4.3) by means of state propaganda, especially during the Cultural Revolution years (1966-1976). As F. Liu (2014) observes, 'the "iron girls" typically wore the unisex blue trouser suit and displayed strength and gestures no different from their male peers' (p.19). Thus, it is no surprise that Chinese women were generally portrayed in newspapers, books, films, and television as strong, brave, and hard working (Jin et al., 2006; Wallis, 2006). However, these efforts can be considered part of the CCP's political strategy to re-mould Chinese women by denying their natural, biological gender differences from men, so as to ensure collective welfare and reduce individuality (Evans, 1997; Leung, 2003). As Evans (2008) notes, the Maoist construction of Chinese women 'was principally defined through class and political considerations, and not through bodily, gendered, and domestic interests' (p.368). At the same time, aside from making contributions to national development, these 'iron' women still needed to take responsibility for the functions of being a good mother and wife, as they continued to be instructed in CCP propaganda to follow patriarchal family norms (Leung, 2003).

#### 4.1.3 Chinese Women in the Reform Era: Between the Late 1970s and the 1990s

After the end of the Cultural Revolution and the consequent collapse of Maoist hegemony, it seems that the Chinese government seized opportunities to pursue new economic strategies. In the late 1970s, the Chinese regime introduced market economic reforms and adopted an ‘opening the door’ policy, as well as embarking on a path of economic modernisation (see Angeloff & Lieber, 2012). However, the basic principle of the economic development project in this reform era was to benefit some categories of people, while bypassing rights and opportunities for vast numbers of others (Wallis, 2006). Worse still, for women, the government placed too much emphasis on essentialist gender differences, and categorised women, along with ‘the elderly and children’, as a disadvantaged group needing special protection, accompanied by a return to traditional, patriarchal norms (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Leung, 2003). In addition, a woman’s role was once again constrained by the obligations to have and bring up children.

In this context of economic reforms, discrimination against women in job recruitment, unequal pay, and gendered divisions of labour became salient problems in the field of employment (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012). Many Chinese women needed to give up work and return home to support their husbands, who normally earned higher salaries. Hence, ‘with increased female unemployment, less state protection and renewed patriarchal-familial norms, the association between the female and the world of “private” life was reasserted’ (F. Liu, 2014, p.20). In this sense, the status of women was associated more with their ‘performance’ in the domestic sphere. This is also reflected in media representations, especially official media, in which a ‘good housewife’ was deliberately constructed as an icon for Chinese women to learn from (Leung, 2003; Wallis, 2006).

Nevertheless, the market economy provided a turning point in the resurgence of a ‘true’ femininity to reverse the masculinisation of the female, or ‘gender erasure’ (*xingbie mosha*; 性别抹杀), that occurred during the Maoist era (Wallis, 2006). As Xu (2009) notes, many Chinese female intellectuals find that ‘women’s liberation has no necessary causal relationship with women participating in paid work’, which, indeed, is a ‘superficial equality between men and women at the cost of not allowing women to be women’ (p.204).

In this respect, the term *nvxing* (女性) – the product resulting from the May Fourth New Cultural Movement (see Section 4.1.1) – reappeared into popular discourse, but with an emphasis on essentialised gender differences, in order to follow CCP discourse (Thornham & Pengpeng, 2010, p.207). This trend continued into the 1990s, in which more Chinese women began to ‘search for the self’ and to take charge of their own life (Xu, 2009). More importantly, female independence in this period was related more to notions of self-worth, self-reliance, and self-identity than to economic independence (F. Liu, 2014; Schaffer & Song, 2007).

Moreover, since the late 1980s, the new image of *nvxing* (女性) which emphasises the female self was further developed under the influence of Western media and consumerism (F. Liu, 2014). As Evans (2008) observes, ‘femininity and sexuality rapidly became themes of vibrant public debate, with diverse opinions circulating in magazine editorials, feature articles, interview, and readers’ letters about the kinds of attitudes and conduct appropriate to the modern woman’ (p.369). In this respect, there was a proliferation of information with regards to fashion, beauty, sports, health, sexuality, and lifestyle among commercial media (Evans, 2008; F. Liu, 2014). Nevertheless, the state used official media outlets to instruct women to maintain the traditional Chinese female image: of a beautiful, gentle, and sweet woman, wife, or mother with economic independence (Evans, 2008; F. Liu, 2014). Hence, it may have been very common to see a range of female identities displayed in the mass media, including ‘the “busy professional”, the “strong woman”, the “media celebrity”, the “full-time housewife”, the financially comfortable domestic manager and even the extramarital lover to a rich man’ (F. Liu, 2014, p.20).

Based on the foregoing discussion, we may observe that the Chinese government seemingly adopted a paradoxical position on women’s development in the reform era; that is, they supposedly provided women with national support for economic independence, yet women still had to behave according to traditional Chinese social norms and cultural values. This is because, as Leung (2003) notes, under the economic reforms, ‘women’s role became one of contributing to the collective good – primarily economically and through participation in the productive process. But this role did not



fully displace the traditional obligations to uphold domestic harmony within a patriarchal structure' (p.369).

#### **4.1.4 The Image of Chinese Women in the Twenty-First Century**

China's active involvement in the processes of globalisation over the past two decades has pushed it to arrive at a 'postmillennial consumerist modernity' (Evans, 2008, p.361), as well as fuelled a culture that further emphasises individual identity. In this context, images of women have also become fluid and diverse, not only signifying the affirmation of individual choice, expression, and pleasure, but also a subversion of the tradition of making personal sacrifices for the collective (E. Chen, 2012; Sima & Pugsley, 2010).

In particular, sex has now become a salient issue in China's public discourse. As Evans (2008) puts it, 'public media and private discussions map endless pleasures and possibilities onto sexed bodies, foregrounding sexuality as an increasingly significant component of individual identity' (p.361). Wallis (2006) also observes that 'women have become increasingly sexualised in the media' (p.96). The prevalent use of the Internet among Chinese people since the 2000's has further contributed to these public sexual discussions (Farrer, 2007). It is worth noting here that there was an emergence of a new school of urban female writing, dubbed 'body writing', which embraced fashion, beauty, glamour, and sexual and material pleasure, as well as a preoccupation with bodily and sexual experiences (E. Chen, 2012; Farrer, 2007; Schaffer & Song, 2007; Zhong, 2006).

However, traditional patriarchal norms and state intervention were never entirely absent from this scene, rendering current images of Chinese women that are often stereotyped and contradictory (E. Chen, 2012; Evans, 2008; Thornham & Pengpeng, 2010). For instance, ideological constraints often place women at a disadvantage in having to choose between marriage, family, and career. As Evans (2008) notes, options available to women to enjoy freedom of active choice are limited by 'the discursive and cultural rootedness of normative understandings of gender' (p.375). This is particularly reflected in official media representations in which women are primarily constructed as workers, housewives, and consumers (Wallis, 2006). Moreover, the widespread use of *funv* (妇女) in official media reflects a return to traditional Confucian conceptions of women.

At the same time, traditional practical norms, especially in terms of marriage, are also prevalent in popular Chinese media. The best known example in this regard is the phenomenon of ‘leftover women’ (*shengnv*; 剩女). In Chinese, leftover women describe those urban females who are unmarried after 27, and who hold university degrees or higher and occupy decent job positions (Lovell, 2014). This term was co-created by television, newspapers, magazines, and even websites, which in turn caused social coercion that pushed women into marriage. In this light, a woman in her late 20s with a decent job but no husband is worthless.

Nowadays, it seems that the boundaries between *nvren* (女人), *nvzi* (女子), *funv* (妇女), or *nvxing* (女性) are blurred, as they co-exist in today’s public, popular, and official discourses. Regardless of the word chosen to describe a Chinese woman, all signal a femininity that is a mixture of commodity, fetish, a symbol of either change or tradition, and an embodiment of the nation (De Kloet, 2008, p.196).

Based on the foregoing discussion, it becomes clear that the Internet is the latest medium in a long list of media where discussions around Chinese women unfolded. As early as in the 1920s and 1930s, major women’s magazines and newspapers began to define ‘what a then-modern Chinese woman is’ by addressing topics of health, sports, fashion, and marriage. In addition, inspired by the May Fourth New Cultural Movement, the advocacy for gender equality made its first impact on public consciousness through public media. After the founding of People’s Republic of China in 1949, based on the CCP’s ideology, public discussions of ‘modern Chinese women’ became invisible while state-run newspapers and periodicals constructed a ‘genderless’ image of women. This is particularly evident in the propaganda of ‘Iron Girls’ in the Cultural Revolution period (1966-1976).

The opening and reform period dating from 1978 has seen a reappearance of public spaces for discussing gender that focused on the definition of women’s self-identity. Newspapers, novels, magazines, and television became a medium to voice opposition to the sacrifices often made by women to undertake traditional obligations. Ironically, they also persuaded Chinese women to bear their family responsibilities and to maintain the traditional Chinese femininity. With the widespread use of the Internet since early 2000s,



an increasing diversity of perspectives in relation to gender entered the public discourses, among which sex had become a salient issue. Nonetheless, most of them, especially in the mainstream media, still followed the patriarchal norms on Chinese women, such as love, marriage, and family.

#### 4.2 Translating the Western Concept of Feminism into Local Action

As mentioned already, the neologism of ‘women’s rights’ became an issue in China at the turn of the twentieth century. This new term was then translated into Chinese as *nvquan* (女权) by adopting the Japanese translation. Meanwhile, Chinese journals of the era produced a new term, *nvquan yundong* (女权运动), to reflect the parallel women’s suffragette movements occurring in the West, after which “women’s rights” (*nvquan*) began to be connected with “ism” (*zhuyi*; [主义]), forming a compound noun “*nvquan zhuyi*” (Ko & Wang, 2006, p.466). This could be seen as the original Chinese rendition of ‘feminism’, i.e. women’s right-ism or power-ism (*nvquan zhuyi*; 女权主义), denoting the demands from women to have the same political rights as men (Ko & Wang, 2006; Min, 2007; Xu, 2009). Yet, the term ‘feminism’ became a ‘taboo’ subject within CCP discourse during the Maoist era (1949-1976), as the government accused the term “feminism” as being “Western, narrow, and bourgeois” (Wang & Zhang, 2010, p.45).

Nevertheless, there was a return to ‘feminism’ in the 1980s when Western feminist thinking re-emerged in China, such as the importation of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex* and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*. At this point, the term ‘feminism’ was translated as *nvxing zhuyi* (女性主义), i.e. woman-ism or feminine-ism, emphasising gender distinctions and feminine characteristics (Ko & Wang, 2006; Min, 2007; Xu, 2009). More importantly, this new translation tried to display Chinese female intellectuals’ desire to identify distinctive Chinese feminism in a global context, by addressing Chinese women’s problems and harmonious, non-antagonist gender relations (Spakowski, 2011). It is also important to recognise that, in social reality, *nvxing zhuyi* (女性主义) – rather than *nvquan zhuyi* (女权主义) – has been widely used in China since the 1990s. A possible explanation in this regard is that many Chinese women grew up under the shadow of the

Cultural Revolution, which resulted in their resistance to any ideas related to turmoil, activism, and protest. In that light, *nvquan zhuyi* (女权主义), in their eyes, is reminiscent of fierce political movements, and so they normally refuse to use this word (see also Min, 2007).

Indeed, feminism in China is not merely a translation issue resulting from the introduction of Western feminist ideas; more often, it has been transformed into local action with specific aims to resolve problems of inequality between men and women. Crucial to this process, as many scholars points out, are the efforts of two kinds of actors that have been made: state-supported women's organisation, the All-China's Women's Federation (ACWF), and women's civic associations (e.g. Howell, 2003; Hsiung et al., 2001; Milwertz, 2002, 2003; Milwertz & Bu, 2007; H. Tan & Wang, 2012; Wang & Zhang, 2010). Here, it is worth noting that the former actor refuses to use either *nvquan zhuyi* (女权主义) or *nvxing zhuyi* (女性主义); instead, they deploy the official terminology of 'equality between men and women' (I will discuss this in more detail in a later section). This is due, in many ways, to the fact that, in the eyes of the government, the term 'feminism' indicates social or political change which can pose potential threats to China's political stability.

In what follows, I will demonstrate how these two types of actors are involved in the transformation process through which the concept of feminism has developed into locally organised action. To set a background for this analysis, I will firstly present a general picture of the Chinese government's efforts to promote gender equality and to raise women's status.

#### **4.2.1 Building a National Legislative Framework**

On September 4, 1995, in the opening ceremony of the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing, the then Chinese President Jiang Zemin clearly announced:

'The Chinese government has attached great importance to women's development and advancement. We pursue "equality between men and women" as a basic state policy.'

(Jiang Zemin, 1995; my translation).

Thirteen years after it was first passed in 1992, a revised '*Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women*' (《中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法》) was passed in 2005, confirming a new status for gender equality as a 'basic national policy.' While gender equality had been written into the Party and state constitutions and laws since the early 1950s, the 1992 law, according to Wu Changzhen, the director of the group responsible for its revision, commented, was 'the first law in China specifically enacted to safeguard women's legitimate rights and interests, to promote equality between men and women and to enable women to play an active role in society' (Retrieve from <http://www.chinese-embassy.org.uk/eng/zt/t213042.htm>)<sup>4</sup>. In fact, there have been hundreds of specific laws and regulations that have sought to protect Chinese women's rights up until the present day <sup>5</sup>, which signals that China has formed a legal system to ensure equality between men and women (L. Tan & Fung, 2011). More specifically, these laws, policies, and regulations have the following objectives:

- The enforcement of women's participation in national, social, and economic affairs;
- The status of women's employment rights, the right to equal income, and labour protection rights;
- Land rights of women peasants in rural areas

(L. Tan & Fung, 2011, p.284)

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<sup>4</sup> Prof. Wu Changzhen was director of the group responsible for revising this law; as a deputy to the National People's Congress he had also been involved in drafting the first law on women's rights and protection in 1992. For more details about the gender equality as China's basic national policy, please go to: <http://acwf.people.com.cn/BIG5/n/2015/0924/c399204-27630232.html> and <http://acwf.people.com.cn/n/2015/0924/c399204-27630218.html>).

<sup>5</sup> These include '*Marriage Law of the People's Republic of China*' (《中华人民共和国婚姻法》), '*Population and Family Planning Law*' (《人口与计划生育法》), '*Law of the People's Republic of China on Land Contract in Rural Areas*' (《中华人民共和国农村土地承包法》), and '*Law of the People's Republic of China on Maternal and Infant Health Care*' (《中华人民共和国母婴保健法》). For a more detailed review of China's laws and policies in relation to women's rights, please refer to: L. Tan and Fung (2011) and Angeloff and Lieber (2012).

In addition, Angeloff and Lieber (2012) observe that ‘in the past two decades, the government has passed many laws to promote and protect women’s rights in the political, social, cultural, and economic realms, in order to turn them into modern and autonomous citizens’ (p.19).

Moreover, in the aftermath of the FWCW in 1995, China’s State Council issued the *first* action programme, entitled ‘*Outline of Women’s Development in China*’ (《中国妇女发展纲要》), to promote women’s development. The focal points of this first outline include: (1) participation in decision-making; (2) employment and job protection; (3) education; (4) health; (5) family planning; (6) violence against women and legal aid; (7) women’s development and quality of life; and (8) rural women’s poverty (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012, p.19). Then, in order to meet the UN Millennium Goals, in 2001 the State Council launched the *second* ‘*Outline of Women’s Development in China*’ (《中国妇女发展纲要》), aiming to ‘promote education for all, non-discrimination against women, and greater attention to the health of mothers and infants’ (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012, p.20). The *third* ‘*Outline of Women’s Development in China*’ (《中国妇女发展纲要》) was launched in 2011, which set new goals for ‘developing women’s participation at all political levels and boosting access to jobs’ (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012, p.21).

Regardless of the government’s efforts, China’s policy of ‘equality between men and women’ has been marked by ‘both progress and reversals’ (Wallis, 2006, p.95). This is because, as Leung (2003) notes, ‘the Confucian values, reinforced through rituals, have remained an integral part of Chinese communist policy’ (p.363). That said, although the government has theoretically encouraged women to participate in the public sphere and helped them gain more rights, Chinese women still experience discrimination within the arenas of family life, education, employment, and political participation (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012; Barlow, 2001; Wallis, 2006). This is due in some ways to the inadvertent efforts of the reform of the market economy, which has placed women in a vulnerable position where they must additionally look after their family, give birth, and rear children. This in turn causes numerous forms of discrimination in the field of employment. On the other hand, the one-child policy has resulted in much higher rates of divorce and domestic

violence against women who have given birth to female infants, simply because of China's stereotypically preference to raise sons (see also Wang, 1997). All of these problems suggest that there is still a lot of room for the government to change policies to further improve women's rights.

#### **4.2.2 The Processes of Women's Organising: The All-China's Women Federation and Women's Civic Associations**

Aside from the Chinese government, women's organisations can be seen as another major constituent in the promotion of women's rights following the state principle of equality between men and women. In this respect, some scholars have used 'organising' to focus on the *processes* through which women not only set up their own organisations but also organise themselves to address gender inequalities in Chinese society (e.g. Jaschok et al., 2001; T. Liu, 2008; Milwertz, 2002).

At the national level, it is the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) that plays a major role in representing women's issues that have resulted from the late 1970s from economic reform and the one-child policy. In fact, since its foundation in 1949, the ACWF has long been the sole women's organisation that fights for the liberation of all Chinese women under the leadership of the China's Communist Party (CCP). Yet, the ACWF in nature is a government institution, as its mandate is to transmit CCP policy and interests to the entire Chinese female population (Howell, 2003; Jaschok et al., 2001). In addition, the ACWF has a well-structured, strict hierarchical system which 'runs from national level down to provincial, municipal, county, district, town and village levels, forming a hierarchical, tree-like network' (Jin, 2001, p.125).

China's economic reforms and opening-up policy brought change to the dominant position of the ACWF in the 1980s. On one hand, the ACWF reduced its hierarchical structures and re-conceptualised its functions in response to women's increasingly diverse needs (Howell, 2003, p.193). Specifically, the ACWF not only began to take a major part in developing the field of women's studies by launching journals, but also sought to defend women's rights through training programmes, the provision of courses, and community services (Angeloff & Lieber, 2012). Meanwhile, some new and more autonomous

organisations emerged<sup>6</sup>, although ‘most of them maintained a kinship with the ACWF system’ (H. Tan & Wang, 2012, p.43). However, as Wang and Zhang (2010) note, ‘in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square demonstrations, the Chinese government curtailed spontaneously organised activism outside of government-sponsored organisations’ (p.41).

Thanks to the UN’s 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) and the parallel NGO forum held in Beijing, women’s organisations, without the support of the government, came back to life. This is because the then-leaders of the Chinese government tried to use this opportunity to ‘change their international image created by their brutal crackdown on student protestors on June 4, 1989’ (Wang, 1996, p.193). In turn, the conference reintroduced the concept of NGOs and made it possible for women scholars and activists to legitimise NGOs in China, by stressing that they were non-governmental but not anti-government. In addition, the FWCW enabled the establishment of diverse women’s groups, organisations, and networks, all with some degree of autonomy and independence from the state (Howell, 2003).

More importantly, the FWCW also introduced the global concept of ‘women’s empowerment’ into China (Wang & Zhang, 2010). It seems that disparate groups of practitioners, female advocates, activists, and researchers all embraced this term and embarked on various forms of programmes to create gender equality. Women’s empowerment also brought innovative ideas about the nature of gender from a global perspective, thereby adding new directions to women’s organisations in the furthering of China’s gender equality.

Therefore, the 1990s was a ‘golden age’ for the growth of non-governmental women’s organisations in China, especially for bottom-up, autonomous groups that were detached from the state system. Such groups were normally well organised, formally structured, and self-funded. Among others, they include Rural Women, the Anti-Domestic Violence Network of China Law Society, Women Watch in China, Gender Watch Women’s Voice, Women Legal-Aid, and the Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre.

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<sup>6</sup> According to B. Liu (2001), there were over 2,000 women’s organisations by 1989.

Meanwhile, a number of universities, colleges and social science academies established gender research centres that combined academic research and campus activities, and aimed to awaken women's gender consciousness in China. The Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University is a good example of this type of organisation. As Milwertz (2002) observes,

Women [in China] have set up groups, organisations and networks, and they have organised activities in the name of theses. They have found office space and meeting places. They have sought funding. They have made their voices heard in the media and through recommendations to policy-makers. [Their collective efforts are] characterised by innovative understandings, thinking and knowledge, which form the basis for challenging dominant discourses on women and gender issues. [...And] characterised by innovative internal organisational practices.

(Milwertz, 2002, p.5)

In the meantime, these new women's organisations address 'a wide range of gender inequality issues and use a variety of activities to target different social levels and groups' (Milwertz & Bu, 2007, p.133)

However, this 'golden age' soon ended with *The Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organisations 1998*, which states that 'to become established, social organisations must be approved by the authorised department' within the Ministry of Civil Affairs. In doing so, the organisations would have to find an *official* supervisory unit 'which would act as a sponsor and be responsible for supervising the day-to-day activities' (Howell, 2003, p.194). The fact remains that, in aiming to operate outside the Party system, women's groups in China were unwilling to find an authority department. To be independent and autonomous, women's groups had to register under the category of 'industry and commerce', thus becoming a corporation. The problem of registering as 'a corporation' was that women's groups were not eligible to receive funding from international donor agencies such as Oxfam and the Ford Foundation. This restricted many groups' further development and existence. Meanwhile, the 1998 regulation 'inhibited the formal registration of new women's groups'. As such, 'it is difficult to

examine exactly how many women's organisations there are in China' (Howell, 2003, p.196), as some groups went 'underground', such as groups supporting lesbian and gay women and men. Currently, women's groups in China are largely small-scale and self-funded, with insufficient resources in terms of money, staff, volunteers and members.

It is worth keeping in mind that the activities developed in the process of women's organising 'not only aim at protest against the party-state and its policies, but also at cooperation with the party-state' (Milwertz, 2002, p.8). In other words, 'both new organisations and elements of the All-China Women's Federation and other party-state institutions' (Milwertz, 2002, p.9) constitute part of the collective phase of women's organising in China.

### **4.3 The Internet in China**

When the Internet expanded in China in late 1990s and early 2000s, Chinese women also grasp this opportunity to become active users and to participate in a wide range of production and consumption practices surrounding the Internet (Kuah-Pearce, 2008). In this respect, although it is true to say that the gender gap between Internet users has gradually closed in the most recent decade, it has not disappeared. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre<sup>7</sup>, in June 1997, female Internet users represented only 12.3% of Internet users in China; by December 2015, this percentage had steadily risen to 46.4% (see Figure 4.4). Against this backdrop, a key question arises: whether the Internet can be used for the empowerment of Chinese women or not? This is because the Internet seems to facilitate both individual and group actors to seek for their own agenda and solutions to gender inequality. Yet, this will not present a utopian picture, as the Internet, at the same time, has posed challenges for Chinese women for discussing issues of their concern. To set the background for this analysis, the following sections will first

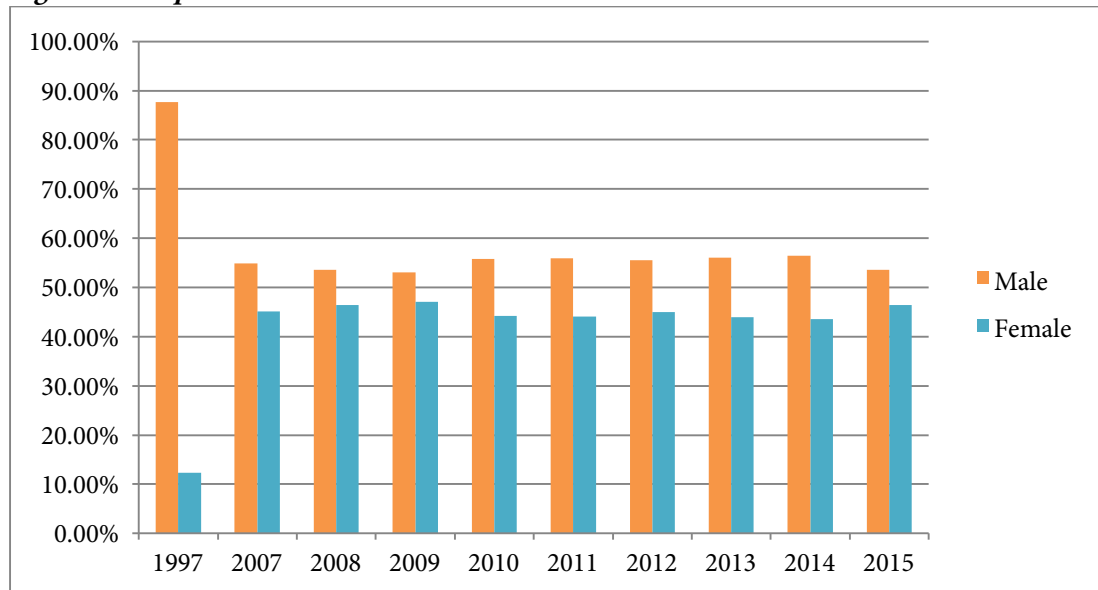
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<sup>7</sup> The China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) is a state network information centre in China, dealing with a variety of Internet statistics. For instance, (1) domain name registry; (2) IP Address and Autonomous System Number Allocation Service; (3) Catalogue Database Service; (4) Technical Researches on Internet Addressing; (5) Internet Survey and Relevant Information Service; (6) International Liaison and Policy Research; and (7) Secretariat of the Internet Policy and Resource Committee, Internet Society of China. It was founded as a non-profit organisation, under the supervision of the Ministry of Information Industry, on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1997. Please see: [www.cnnic.net.cn](http://www.cnnic.net.cn).



briefly introduce how Chinese women use the Internet, and then present a broader context of the Chinese Internet culture.

**Figure 4.4 Gap between male and female Internet users in China**



Source: CNNIC [www.cnnic.net.cn](http://www.cnnic.net.cn).

#### 4.3.1 Chinese Women's Use of the Internet

For Chinese women's use of the Internet, a salient feature has been the digital divide between urban and rural online users. In this regard, a common argument is that the Internet merely 'works to the advantage of the young and the middle class women' (Kuah-Pearce, 2008, p.27). In a very similar vein, McLaren (2003) points out that 'Internet usage in Chinese is largely restricted to young, single, highly educated and highly paid... women living in cities' (p.7). Empirical research conducted by Kuah-Pearce (2008) shows that Internet use by urban women in China is mainly to (1) search and gather information on education, beauty and health; (2) build up social networks and create cyber-communities; and (3) liberate women to express their sexuality. Such findings also concur with the current Chinese notion of women which is characterised by women's seeking of self and sexual identity (see Section 4.1.4).

Despite the fact that there is a clear stratification of female online use in China, the appearance of the Internet has still opened up a new space for women to express their

individual concerns. Perhaps one of the most significant contributions that women have made in this regard is their efforts to popularise female weblogs more widely in China. CNNIC survey data also reveals that, by July 2009, the number of female bloggers (approximately 99 million) was unexpectedly higher than that of male bloggers (approximately 81 million), by approximately ten per cent (CNNIC, 2009). According to MacKinnon (2008), this should be attributed to Mu Zimei, 'who in 2003 rose to national notoriety with her blog containing daily updates about her extremely active and varied sex life' (p.35). As Tai (2010) notes, 'the server hosting her blog at Blogcn.com required an upgrade to keep up with the heavy traffic (averaging 110, 000 visitors a day in the peak month)' (p.40). Following that, a number of women followed in Mu Zimei's footsteps to publish their own intimate or sexual life details through blogs in 2004, and these also earned widespread public attention. Although they quickly faded away, the existence of these women bloggers 'had created a most unexpected source of boost for China's budding blogosphere [...] by encouraging more Internet users to jump on the blogging bandwagon' (Tai, 2010, p.41).

More importantly, the underlying value of Mu Zimei and subsequent women bloggers has been attached to the emergence of a debate over sexual rights in China (Farrer, 2007). In this way, 'despite censorship and government controls, popular discussions on the Internet are a site for claiming and defining liberal sexual rights' (Farrer, 2007, p.9). This concurs with Plummer's (1995, 2001, 2003) notion of 'intimate citizenship', which can contribute to the recasting of women as decision makers in terms of the private and personal aspects of their everyday lives. Increasingly, it is being recognised in China, and elsewhere, that sexuality has become a significant component of individual identity and social and cultural change since the twentieth century (Attwood, 2006; Evans, 2008; Farrer, 2007). Hence, it is necessary for women to develop a new framework of sexual ethics in order to rethink 'how we should live' and to deal with the ethical dilemmas they confront coupled with the ongoing process of individualisation (see Attwood, 2006; Giddens, 1991; Plummer, 2001). However, there are surprisingly few studies of Chinese women's use of the Internet in this regard.

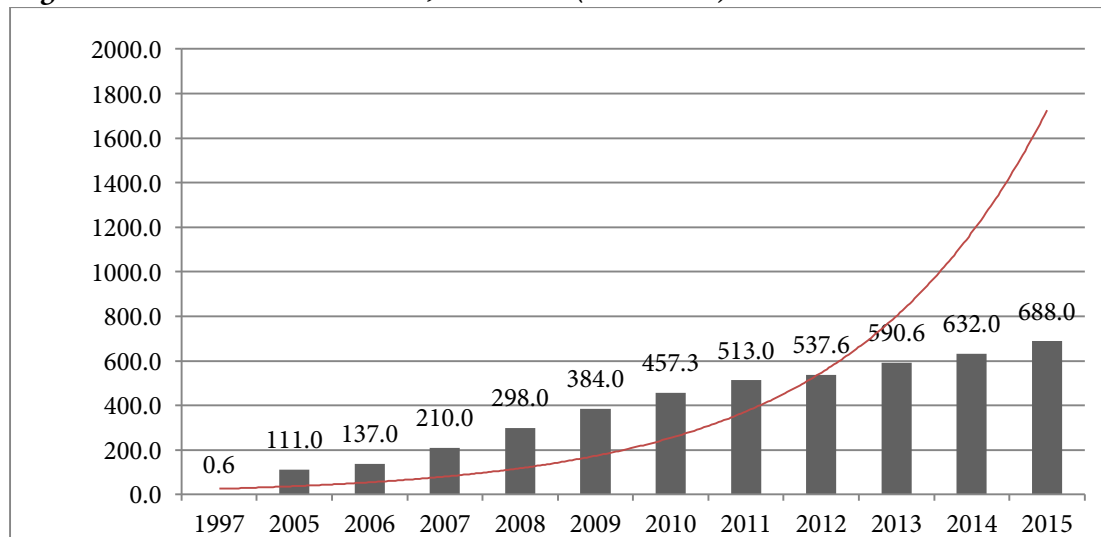
In urban China, a well-established fact is that women's groups, organisations, and networks are important actors that play a role in promoting women's rights and creating social change (see section 4.2.2). At the same time, they are early adopters of the Internet (see also Yang, 2009b, 2014a). T. Liu's (2008) empirical study also finds that leading women's groups, organisations, and networks also began to establish their own official websites and actively relied on the Internet to engage in the process of women's organising in China. Meanwhile, having considered the open, low-cost characteristics of the Internet, a new type of actor in the field of women's groups has emerged; that is, loosely structured and Internet-based online communities. Still, studies of the relationship between women's groups and the Internet, and its socio-political consequences, are scarce.

Moreover, female Internet users in China need to cope with the complex online environments in which there are intangible relationships between everyday practices, politics, and government interventions (see also Herold & de Seta, 2015). As Yang (2009b) notes, 'of all the aspects of Chinese Internet culture, the most important and yet least understood is its contentious character' (p.1). On one hand, the fast development of the Internet has facilitated Chinese users, including women, to participate in different social, political, and cultural practices, such as informing, social networking, gaming, or political campaigning (see W. Chen, 2014; Wallis, 2011; Yang, 2009b; Yang, 2012). On the other, government control (e.g. Internet filtering, blocking, and censoring) has made it difficult for people, regardless of men or women, to freely talk about current affairs and politics as well as to organise political activism (see Herold, 2011; Li, 2010; Yang, 2011). Yet, it is worth noting that Chinese Internet users have tried to negotiate this control of the Internet in creative ways, which, in turn, has characterised Chinese cyberspace as a carnival, a playful place filled with satire, parody, and noise (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Yang, 2009b). Commercialisation is also thought to have played a major role in developing Chinese Internet culture more towards the realm of the spectacle (Li, 2010; Poell et al., 2014; Yang, 2011). All these trends have the impact on the shaping of a unique Chinese Internet, and make it different from the elsewhere.

#### 4.3.2 A Brief Introduction to the Chinese Internet Environment

The Internet in China has a short history that can only be traced back to the late 1980s when universities set up intranets in their campuses (Herold, 2011, p.1). It is only in 1997 that the Internet began to appear in China's private households. Nevertheless, China's Internet use is growing fast. According to CNNIC, in 1997, only 620,000 Chinese people had the access to the Internet, but by 2010, China had become the country with the highest number of the Internet users (457 million) in the world (CNNIC, 1997, 2011). This number reached 688 million in December 2015, meaning that half of the Chinese population is now online (CNNIC, 2016). Figure 4.5 shows this changing trend in Internet users since 1997.

**Figure 4.5 Chinese Internet Users, 1997-2015 (in millions)**

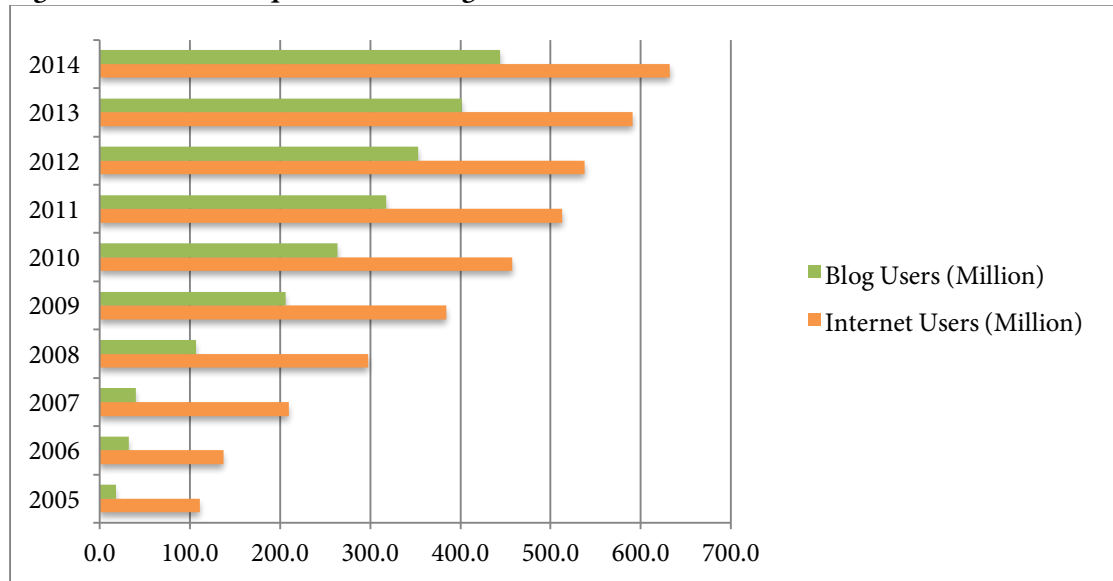


Source: CNNIC [www.cnnic.net.cn](http://www.cnnic.net.cn).

However, the digital divide between urban and rural areas is a severe problem in China. Based on the CNNIC (2016) statistics, as of December 2015, 195 million rural residents had access to the Internet, consisting of only 28.4% of total Internet users in China, while the rate in urban areas was 71.6%. In addition, Chinese Internet users show a younger age trend to other areas. Over 50% of all Internet users in China are under the age of 30, while the percentages of frequent Internet users aged between 30-39 and 40-49 are just 23.8% and 13.1%, respectively (CNNIC, 2016). This phenomenon, as Herold and

de Seta (2015, p.77) suggest, is followed by the common assumption that Internet use in China is mostly youth-related (see also Yang, 2009a). Here, it is worth mentioning the popularity of weblogs among Chinese Internet users. Weblogs began to emerge in China in the early 2000s. According to CNNIC (2009), in 2002, Chinese weblogs were still in their infancy and there were only 0.51 million blogger users at that time. However, this number had jumped to 444 million in 2009 (Figure 4.6).

**Figure 4.6 The development of weblogs in China**



Source: CNNIC [www.cnnic.net.cn](http://www.cnnic.net.cn).

At the same time, CNNIC (2016) shows that the most popular online practices adopted by Chinese Internet users are: instant messaging (90.7%), search (82.3%), news reading (82.0%), social networking (77.0%), video watching (73.3%), music listening (72.8%), making payments (60.5%), shopping (60%), and gaming (56.9%). At this point, it is worth noting the prominence of Chinese social media, which started when the Sina corporation launched a copycat of Twitter, Sina Weibo<sup>8</sup> (weibo means microblog in Chinese), in 2009. Since then, 'major commercial portal sites like Sohu, NetEase, and Tencent, and the official People.com.cn all launched microblogging services one after

<sup>8</sup> Nowadays, Sina Weibo is still the most popular microblog platform in China, with more than 500 million registered users and 212 million monthly active users (Koetse, 2015).

another' (Yang, 2011, p.439). Most Weibo users are engaged in reading news, communicating with friends, shopping, and photo sharing.

#### **4.3.3 Governance, Censorship, and Commercialisation**

The Internet in China is under strict control and surveillance, and the freedom that people enjoy online is actually limited. This has been reinforced time and again by a number of researchers (e.g. Herold & de Seta, 2015; King et al., 2013; Li, 2010; MacKinnon, 2008; Taneja & Wu, 2014; Yang, 2011, 2014a, 2014b). The main reason is that the Internet in China is not autonomous but is instead tightly linked with the state. The key Internet access providers (IAPs) in China – who are in charge of providing individuals and other Internet service providers (ISPs) with access to the Internet – are all state-owned or state-sponsored entities. This also suggests that the freedom that Chinese people enjoy on the Internet is 'government-allowed' (Herold, 2011, p.2). In other words, 'the government has the ability to curtail or even deny the Internet to its citizens' (Herold, 2011, p.2). As a consequence, the Internet has become a state property (Li, 2010), as well as chiefly an intranet (Fong, 2009; Leibold, 2011).

As well as setting up the largest and most sophisticated censoring system in the world, the Chinese government also conducts surveillance on the operation of the Internet (ONI, 2010). China's online censorship is achieved through four strategies: (1) the 'Great Firewall of China' (GFW); (2) ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words or phrases; (3) the coercion of multinational technology corporations; and (4) real-world access controls (Herold & de Seta, 2015; Yang, 2011). The aim of the GFW is to 'limit access to any content that might potentially undermine the state's control or social stability' (ONI, 2010, p.447), which can be classified under three sensitive subjects (see Table 4.1). ISP-enforced blacklisting of specific words or phrases (e.g. Dalai Lama, Falun Gong, Egypt Movement) is a common experience that Chinese people are confronted with. This exercise has forced a few multinational corporations (e.g. Yahoo!, Microsoft) to comply with the central government's regulations. A final method of control is real-name registration for both individual users and Internet cafés. In this vein, all Internet users need to register their ID

cards before gaining access to the Internet, and all Internet cafés are required to register and take records of customer information.

**Table 4.1 Classification of sensitive subjects**

Most vulnerable	Less vulnerable	Least vulnerable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free expression and media freedom;</li> <li>• Political transformation and opposition parties;</li> <li>• Political reform, legal reform, and governance;</li> <li>• Militants, extremists, and separatists;</li> <li>• Human rights;</li> <li>• Foreign relations and the military;</li> <li>• Minority rights and ethnic content;</li> <li>• Sensitive or controversial history, arts, and literature;</li> <li>• Hate speech;</li> <li>• Minority faiths;</li> <li>• Religious conversation, commentary, and criticism;</li> <li>• Anonymity and circumvention;</li> <li>• Hacking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women's rights;</li> <li>• Sex education and family planning;</li> <li>• Gay/lesbian content;</li> <li>• Pornography;</li> <li>• Gambling;</li> <li>• Alcohol and drugs;</li> <li>• Blogging domains and blogging services;</li> <li>• Web hosting sites and portals;</li> <li>• Free e-mail;</li> <li>• Search engines;</li> <li>• Multimedia sharing;</li> <li>• Groups and social networking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Environmental issues;</li> <li>• Economic development;</li> <li>• Public health;</li> <li>• Provocative attire;</li> <li>• Dating;</li> <li>• Gaming;</li> <li>• Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP);</li> <li>• Translation;</li> <li>• P2P;</li> <li>• Commercial sites</li> </ul>

**Source.** Faris and Villeneuve (2008, p.7)

While the above-mentioned censorship strategies continue, as Yang (2014b) argues, the Chinese government have introduced ‘more proactive and multi-pronged forms of management and control’ (p.109). These include ‘using [the] law to punish misdemeanours, using covert methods to monitor and channel online expression, and resorting to political campaigns to mould online expression and behaviour’ (Yang, 2014b, p.109). As early as 2004, governmental propaganda departments had hired volunteers or

paid staff as ‘Internet commentators’<sup>9</sup> (*wangluo pinglun yuan* 网络评论员) in order to guide public opinion. When these Internet commentators found content that could cause harm to the government’s image, they would intervene in the online discussion and change the direction of the debate to be more friendly towards the government. In addition, governmental agencies were encouraged to build their official websites or social media accounts to tell ‘positive’ stories to Chinese people (Yang, 2014b). Underlying all these forms, as Yang (2014b) assumes, seems to be the government’s intention to expand their system of Internet control through ideological work and cultural governance in a more subtle and sophisticated manner (see also Yang, 2011).

At the same time, the Chinese Internet has become highly embedded in commercialisation (W. Chen, 2014; Yang, 2011). On one hand, most of the leading sites, apart from official sites, are owned by large media companies in China (e.g. Sina, Sohu, NetEase, Tencent). On the other, as mentioned already, one of the primary uses of the Internet for Chinese people is for commercial purposes (see section 4.3.1). In this environment, as Poell et al. (2014) note, ‘many online platforms are engaged in fierce competition with each other over audiences and advertising revenue’ (p.2). Some even hire Internet users as ‘pushing hands’ (*wangluo tuishou* 网络推手) to generate volumes of Web traffic. ‘Pushing hands’ normally ‘write blogs or BBS postings crafted to provoke controversy in order to draw responses and enhance online interaction’, which indeed ‘may significantly harm the credibility of online information in the long run’ (Yang, 2011, p.450).

#### **4.3.4 Forming a Carnavalesque Chinese Internet: Users’ Reactions to Political Control**

Given the developmental trajectory of Chinese Internet use and the prevalence of online censoring schemes, one would expect Chinese Internet users to do nothing but play (Yang, 2009b, p.1). In addition, commercialisation can be seen as another factor that has caused most online discourse to become apolitical and trivial by trying to avoid sensitive topics

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<sup>9</sup> Also known as the ‘fifty-cent party’, because these Internet commentators earned fifty cents (RMB) for each posting.



(Leibold, 2011). This is also confirmed by the surveys conducted by CNNIC. As introduced already (see section 4.3.1), none of the top 10 online activities are related to political expression or activism; instead, they mainly focus on leisure entertainment and socialising.

However, all these trends only reveal part of the full picture of the Chinese character of the Internet, as they have ignored the radical nature of Chinese Internet culture, in which not only is online entertainment not apolitical, but political control itself is an arena of struggle (Yang, 2009b, p.1). Leibold (2011) also observes that ‘occasionally, discussion reaches a more serious level and can redirect public attention and anger at the state and political actors in the real world, empowering ordinary netizens to shape and, in some limited cases, alter government policies’ (p.1026).

In fact, Chinese Internet users have developed a variety of ritual techniques – including coded language, humour, puns, jokes, memes, verse, songs, or flash videos – to mock or critique government policies (Yang, 2009b, 2014a). The best known example is the ‘Song of Grass-Mud Horse’ (草泥马之歌), created by Internet users to express their anger at government control of the Internet. On May 19, 2009, China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) issued a directive that all computers sold in China must pre-install a filtering software called Green Dam Youth Escort, which was designed to protect teenagers from pornography. However, it was widely regarded as part of the government’s subtle strategy to place Internet users’ behaviours under surveillance. In addition, computer experts found that the code in the software was programmed to block politically-sensitive terms. In this context, Chinese Internet users created the ‘Song of Green-Mud Horse’, as its Chinese pronunciation, *Cao Ni Ma*, sounds like ‘fuck your mother’, implying ‘fuck the government’.

More recently, Yang and Jiang (2015) found that ‘online political satire is not always about political resistance and opposition. It serves social functions, although its social uses can be appropriated for political purposes’ (p.2). In this respect, Chinese Internet users’ satirical sense of humour has expanded to cover various social problems, such as corrupt government officials, stock market crashes, and air pollution. As a consequence, ‘the (Chinese) Internet is filled with a *cacophony* of conflicting opinions, irrelevant or

emotional outbursts, images stretching from the beautiful to the grotesque and beyond, etc.’ (Herold, 2011, p.11; emphasis in origin). In this respect, it seems that the metaphor of the ‘carnival’, derived from the work of Bakhtin (1984a, 1984b), becomes the first choice for describing the dominant characteristic of Chinese Internet culture (e.g. Herold & Marolt, 2011; Yang, 2009b).

Within this carnivalesque Chinese Internet, it is unusual to see that Chinese civic associations – as a collective actor – have actively taken part in the process of critiquing government policies or current affairs. This is, in many ways, due to the fact that ‘a state critique’ and ‘collective activities’ are the prioritised targets of Internet censorship (King et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the work conducted by civic associations in China is often related to these two aspects. Thus, their efforts, in the eyes of government authorities, have produced a collective action that potentially implies ‘a threat to domestic social stability, national security, and the credibility of law enforcement authorities’ (Yang, 2014a, p.115). On the contrary, the Chinese government has shown different attitudes towards individual expressions that merely mock them. As Yang (2014a) observes, ‘the growing frequency of Internet incidents concerning corrupt officials, vulnerable individuals, and environmental protection indicates an increase in the number of incidents, as well as more government tolerance of public discussion of these issues’ (p.115).

However, as Yang (2009b, 2014a) argues, under the Chinese government’s strict control and the prevalence of Internet censorship, Chinese civic associations have become more active and artful through adopting a non-confrontational approach to social change. More specifically, in China, ‘NGO-led activism in urban areas, such as women’s and environmental activisms, adopts indirect forms of civic action such as media campaigns, public forums, exhibitions, and field trips’ (Yang, 2009b, p.28). Meanwhile, Chinese civic associations typically employ the Internet to inform, organise activities, network, and for organisational publicity (Yang, 2003a). More recently, some civic associations, especially those with an environmental remit, have shifted their focus to microblogging platforms. These organisations mainly use Weibo to aggressively diffuse information to the public and to network with like-minded users so as to enhance visibility of their specific agenda

(Huang & Sun, 2014; Yang, 2014a). Once again, these civic associations do not use the Internet either to call for street protests and demonstrations, or to criticise the government.

#### **4.4 Concluding Remarks**

This chapter has set the context by firstly reviewing the background on how definitions of the role of women changed in Chinese society. Centred around four Chinese notions of ‘woman’ – that is, *nvren* (女人), *nvzi* (女子), *funv* (妇女), and *nvxing* (女性), I presented a general picture of what Chinese women were in different historical contexts. At the same time, I provided a brief introduction of how discussions on gender unfolded in Chinese public media, ranging from the traditional media of newspapers, magazines, and television to the latest medium of the Internet. I then analysed how women’s issues were addressed in China by focusing on the efforts made by the Chinese government and women’s groups, organisations, and networks. Finally, I demonstrated what kind of opportunities and challenges the Internet has offered/posted to Chinese women for their own needs, desires, and aspirations, as well as a broader context of the Chinese Internet culture.

## **Chapter 5 A Multi-Method Study of Women's Empowerment and the Internet: Design, Implementation and Evaluation**

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### **5.1 Methodological Framework: A Mixed Methods Study**

As discussed in the literature chapters (Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), I conceptualise women's empowerment as a communication process, as well as investigate how the constituted communicative practices can shape this process to challenge a patriarchal structure. I then place the Internet at the centre of this framework in order to explore the ways in which female actors utilise the Internet's communicative affordances to bring about changes in society. The logic of my conceptual framework, alongside the application of the Internet within it, is to generate empirical findings about communication technologies in the processes of empowering women.

In this sense, my study could be inductive in nature, in which 'theory is the outcome of research' by 'drawing generalisable inferences out of observations' (Bryman, 2012, p.26). However, it is worth noting that I will follow Silverman's (2010) logic to adopt an approach of 'simplistic inductivism' (p.84) to conduct my research. For Silverman (2010), the traditional inductive approach for sociological ethnographers 'can be blind to the need to build cumulative bodies of knowledge' (p.85). This is because they believe that 'any prior definitions of topics or concepts would only stand in the way of a sensitive understanding of the slice of the cultural world to which one was being exposed' (Silverman, 2010, p.84). Thus, what I will do instead is to treat 'the knowledge [I] have learned as a resource [which] involves thinking about how it can sensitise [me] to various researchable issues' (Silverman, 2010, p.89). As became evident in my literature review, I have been informed by relevant concepts from previous studies and have used them as sensitising resources to create a better definition of my research topic (Silverman, 2010, pp.89-90).

At the same time, the exploratory process of such a 'theoretical lens' reveals the underlying paradigm of my research, which is defined as 'a general philosophical orientation about the world and the nature of research that a researcher brings to a study' (Creswell, 2014, p.6). Reality in my study captures women's empowerment, one of the

specific issues addressed within the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2007, 2010). According to Mertens (2010), a transformative paradigm is ‘explained and illustrated as a framework for researchers who place a priority on social justice and the furtherance of human rights’ (p.469). This paradigm also provided the basis for modelling my research design, since it ‘shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data are collected and analysed, and provides a call for action or change’ (Creswell, 2014, p.64).

The next step was then to find workable research questions for my study, as they can clarify my research focus and help me to choose the resultant methods and during data collection (Silverman, 2010, p.84). To do so, I turned to the knowledge I had learned (i.e. for the literature review) to formulate my research questions. As is clear from the conceptual framework, women’s empowerment in my study characterises both the individual and the collective actors. To investigate the role of the Internet in these processes, I developed my research questions as follows:

**Main Question:** What is the role of the Internet in women’s empowerment in China?

**RQ1:** What is the role of women’s blogs in the process of women’s empowerment in China?

- How do female bloggers use their weblogs in the process of performing their identity, connecting with others and developing their interpersonal networks, as well as expressing themselves about the issues that concern them?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of blogs in this process?

**RQ2:** How do women’s groups use websites to empower women in China?

- What is the role of websites in the process of informing, building a sense of the collective, as well as campaigning, and networking with peer organisations?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of websites in this process?

To answer the research questions, I focused on women’s blogs for the examination of the first sub-question, and women’s groups for the second sub-question. This is because, in China, on the one hand the number of female bloggers has been about ten per cent

higher than that of male bloggers since 2009, and on the other, the popularity of weblogs was triggered by women between the years of 2004 and 2005 (see Chapter 4). All this suggests that 'weblogs and women' have become a general phenomenon that deserves to be explored and studied. On the other, the reason to choose women's groups for the second sub-question is because this question in its own right reflects an organisational nature. Again, as introduced in Chapter 4, women's groups have a history of playing a key role in furthering China's gender equality. In particular, the United Nation's 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW), held in Beijing, brought about a significant development for women's groups in China. All these factors encouraged me to focus on the Web presence of women's groups in order to answer the second research question.

As can be seen from the research questions, the word 'what' in the main question explicitly points to the exploratory character of my research, which is relatively open-ended and qualitative. At the same time, the term 'what are the benefits and limitations' in each sub-question calls attention to both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to further explain the details. Therefore, these research questions utilise 'a qualitative priority where a greater emphasis is placed on the qualitative methods and the quantitative methods are used in a secondary role' (Creswell & Clark, 2012, p.65). In other words, they informed me to adopt a mixed methods approach to the design of my study. This decision was also guided by the transformative paradigm of the study, which brings about 'an inclination to use mixed methods' (Mertens, 2007, p.219). As suggested already, women's empowerment in my study is a complex process that involves a series of communicative actions. Therefore, the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods seems to be the most appropriate approach to develop a more complete understanding of this research problem, and one that addresses different perspectives (see Creswell, 2014, p.218). In addition, the mixed methods approach allows me to draw on 'both qualitative and quantitative research' and minimise 'the limitations of both approaches' (Creswell, 2014, p.218), and provides me with 'a more comprehensive account of the area of enquiry' (Bryman, 2006, p.106). All of these factors bring greater validity to my study.

However, existing empirical research seems to create two separate strands in examining the role of the Internet in advancing women: 'one [...] was to try to change

[gender inequality] through organised political action, another was to seek to advance in the world as a purposive individual and triumph against the odds' (Curran, 2012, p.55). Thus, the mixed methods approach I developed in the study would need to allow me to explore how both individual and organisational actors use the Internet to facilitate the processes of women's empowerment.

In addition, when it comes to adopting a multi-method approach to answering my research questions, the Internet in its own right becomes a particular challenge that I need to overcome. According to Wellman (2010), we now enter into an age within which Internet studies have exhibited two opposing but complementary trends:

One trend is the development of 'Internet studies' as a field in its own right, bringing together scholars from the social sciences, humanities, and computer sciences [...] The second trend is the incorporation of Internet research into the mainstream conferences and journals of their disciplines, with projects driven by ongoing issues. This brings the more developed theories, methods, and substantive lore of the disciplines into play, although sometimes at the cost of the adventurous innovativeness of interdisciplinary Internet research.

(Wellman, 2010, p.21)

This inevitably begs the question of whether traditional methods are adequate for analysing Web-based projects, or whether new methods should be devised (Herring, 2010).

To address these problems, I needed to refer to existing empirical studies which adopted a multi-methods approach to examine Web-based phenomena, either related to individual or organisational behaviour. Given the fact that I had chosen women's blogs as one unit of the research sample to investigate the role of the Internet in women's empowerment from an individual perspective, I firstly turned to those empirical studies that focused on blogs. However, based on my comprehensive review, the most common strategy in this respect was the monologue approach: analysis based on either texts (e.g. textual analysis, content analysis, or discourse analysis) or ethnography. This suggested that I needed to develop my own multi-method strategy to examine women's blogs in my study.

Bearing this in mind, I at the same time reviewed those empirical studies which addressed the relationship between organisations and the Internet, as my second unit in the research sample related to women's groups. At this point, there were two methodologies evident adopting a multi-methods approach that seemed to fit with my research needs: the first is called 'web sphere analysis' (Foot, 2010; Foot & Schneider, 2002, 2006; Foot et al., 2003; Schneider & Foot, 2005), and the second is 'network ethnography' (Howard, 2002, 2006). This also made me consider whether I could apply these two methodologies to the study of women's blogs, since, in nature, they are used to investigate the role of new communication technologies within a phenomenon in broader social contexts. In what follows, I will discuss how they provided important insights into the design of my research methodology.

## **5.2 Thinking about the Potential Use of Web Sphere Analysis and Network Ethnography**

When it comes to applying Web sphere analysis and network ethnography to my research methodology, I have treated them both as multi-method frameworks, as Web sphere, network, and ethnography are, at the same time, treated as theories (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006; Scott & Carrington, 2011).

### **5.2.1 Web Sphere Analysis**

According to Foot and Schneider (2006), Web sphere analysis, as an approach, is used to investigate 'relations between producers and users of Web materials as potentiated and mediated by the structural and feature elements of websites, hypertexts, and the links between them' (p.28). From this perspective, Web sphere analysis is a useful starting point that helps me to analyse the characteristics of specific websites or Web pages by focusing on particular features, such as types of information, types of links, multiple interaction options, etc. (Foot & Schneider, 2006; Kavada, 2012). This systematic analysis of features 'inscribes particular forms of communicative, social and/or political action on the part of Web producers, and enables or constrains particular forms of online and offline action on the part of Web users' (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p.165). It is therefore a good choice to



establish a two-way connection between Web producers and potential users, as traditional 'media effect' research often comes to 'studying how technology is used' rather than the relationship between producers and consumers (Howard, 2006, p.206).

In addition, 'interview[s], focus groups, experiments, or surveys [can be] conducted with site producers and Web users and triangulated with Web annotations and objects to interpret the sphere' (Foot & Schneider, 2006, p.28). Thus, Web sphere analysis contributes to research accuracy, as it employs a triangulation strategy to look at the same phenomenon from multiple viewpoints following the adoption of mixed methods (Neuman, 2014, p.166).

Although Foot and her collaborators view hyperlinks as the essence of the Web, their emphasis is placed on the relationships between 'producers of Web materials' and 'sites for Web users', instead of the network structures of the Web (Foot, 2010; Foot et al., 2003). As many scholars point out, a 'network of networks' has become the distinguishing feature of the Internet, which is powered by the most basic structural element of the Internet – the hyperlink (e.g. Chadwick, 2006; Dahlgren, 2009; Lievrouw, 2011; Macnamara, 2014; Park, 2003). Park (2003) defines a hyperlink as 'a technological capability that enables one specific website (or Web page) to link with another' (p.49). From this perspective, 'a website functions as a node that passes messages and determines their paths according to a selection of hyperlinks' (Park, 2003, p.53). Thus, 'patterns of hyperlinks designed or modified by individuals or organisations who own websites reflect the communicative choices, agendas of the owners' (Park, 2003, p.53). To address the patterns of relations among individual and organisational nodes on the Web and related communication actions, Howard's (2002, 2006) methodological framework of network ethnography provides a good starting point.

### **5.2.2 Network Ethnography**

According to Howard (2002), network ethnography is the 'process of using ethnographic field methods on cases and field sites selected using social network analysis' (p.561). In other words, this approach is a synergy between ethnography and social network analysis. With regard to the Internet, it has become increasingly difficult for ethnographic

researchers to accurately select samples to ensure a high standard of qualitatively-cultural analysis, as 'new communication technologies permit ever more nuanced human interaction over large areas' (Howard, 2002, p.556). Although social network analysis is good at 'making personal relationships comparable' and identifying 'the relative positioning of members and the partitioning of subgroups' (Howard, 2002, p.559), it 'misses much of the information that the researcher can obtain by [actually] participating [...] and observing' (Howard, 2006, p.217). Thus, network ethnography develops an effective strategy to lower these methodological barriers, especially in terms of gathering data from quantitative sampling for in-depth qualitative analysis.

In this respect, it is worth noting that if I applied network ethnography to my study, the sample to be examined by social network analysis was more suitably drawn through the process of identifying constituent elements of the Web sphere as discussed above. Through a systematic and closer look at the positions of those member sites or pages within the sphere – core or periphery – I can choose specific informants for 'active or passive observation, extended immersion, or in-depth interviews' (Howard, 2002, p.561) for more detail with greater accuracy. At the same time, as Howard assumes, 'herein lies another advantage to network ethnography: it may help the researcher manage entrance into communities of practice' (Howard, 2002, p.561).

Therefore, for the main phase of this research's design, I decided to use both methodologies of Web sphere analysis and network ethnography. As mentioned earlier, the reason for this is that there is a lack of empirical studies which have adopted a multi-methods approach to blogs (including women's blogs). As such, I turned to these two methodologies instead, although both cases of these focus on political campaigning groups and organisations built around the Internet. Hence, the methodological application of these to women's blogs became my major challenge in the main phase of the study, while, for women's groups, I had to evaluate whether any amendments would be needed. Given the fact that both methodologies of Web sphere analysis and network ethnography deploy a multi-methods approach, I also had to decide what data should be gathered and what research methods might be combined.

### **5.3 Main Phase of Study I: Application of Features Analysis and Social Network Analysis**

The aim of Phase I was to become familiar with the use of the Internet for women bloggers and women's groups, which would provide a basis for exploring the ways in which they are involved in the processes of women's empowerment. It is therefore the analysis in this phase that focuses on the Web. To this end, I drew attention to those Internet-based methods, features analysis and social network analysis, derived from Web sphere analysis and network ethnography. In what follows, I will explain in greater detail how I applied these two methods to make them work with my proposed research questions.

#### **5.3.1 Features Analysis**

##### ***5.3.1.1 Individual Bloggers***

To answer the first research question, I chose 'Sina Blog Eladies' (SBE) as my primary source of sample selection because, at the time the study was conducted, it was the most comprehensive collection of blogs that included women-related content. According to its homepage (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/lm/eladies/>), SBE aims to provide a space for women to construct their identity 'through narratives of fashion, health, beauty, love, and marriage and sexual relationships'. SBE is one directory of Sina Blog (<http://blog.sina.com.cn>), a blog service provided by the largest Chinese portal corporation, Sina.com. – which is subject to the government's control, surveillance, and regulation (Tai, 2010). In other words, the launch of Sina Blog, including SBE, is officially approved. In addition, as a hosting platform, the Sina Blog provides the software and hardware that allows bloggers to design their blogs, edit personal information, update posts, and choose web-based tools or applications without registration fees.

The initial intention for Sina chief executives in establishing the Sina Blog service in 2005 was to create 'a celebrity culture' by inviting social celebrities, who were already well-known to the public (e.g. writers, stars, journalists, hosts/hostesses, singers, etc.), to open Sina Blog accounts (Tai, 2010). Hence, SBE also enjoyed a reputation for drawing 'famous' bloggers to write about women's issues at the time the study was conducted. On the other

hand, if a 'common' blogger wants to be seen by the audience, they needed to voluntarily forward their posts to editors who decided whether to publish them on the homepage of SBE or not. This also meant that 'common' blog users are not as visible as 'famous' blog users.

On the homepage of SBE (see Figure 5.1), editors list featured blog posts (with embedded links to blogs' URLs) according to the following main subject categories: fashion, health, beauty, love, marriage and sexual relationships. SBE editors also update the most popular blog posts and blogs on the homepage based on daily, monthly and total numbers of page views. Although SBE editors set up a blogger directory at the bottom of the homepage and include other ranking lists, all of these are updated from time to time. In other words, a complete directory of SBE blogs does not exist, and it is also impossible to calculate the exact number of blogs due to the highly dynamic and flexible character of SBE.

In the absence of such an official directory, my strategy was to focus on the blogs listed on the homepage of SBE and to collect those that appeared on the homepage between 12 December and 27 December 2011. In total, the sample consisted of 107 single-authored blogs that mainly address issues in fashion, health, beauty, love, marriage, and sexual relationships. However, during the initial stage of the study, my understanding of women's empowerment was limited, which made me exclude 48 beauty, health, and fashion blogs, as I assumed that they paid little attention to 'real' problems about women's rights or interests. This meant that my final sample was composed of 59 blogs, whose topical foci were centred on love, marriage, and sexual relationships.

Following this, a reasonable next step emerged: how should I apply the method of features analysis to these blogs? In doing so, my strategy was to refer to content analysis – a very commonly used method 'to identify and quantify structural and functional properties of the blogs' (Herring et al., 2005, p.147), according to my reviewed empirical analyses of weblogs. In particular, informed by the set of coding categories developed by Herring et al. (2005), I incorporated relevant features into my coding schedule to identify the salient structural features that appeared in my selected sample, and to observe the communicative practices that these afford.

Figure 5.1 Screenshot of homepage of Sina Blog Eladies (SBE)

女性博客 Issue Category

女性首页 | 博客排行 | 热点专题 | 博客总排行 | 博客名录

女性博客 时尚 娱乐 文艺 财经 汽车 教育 游戏 军事 星座 家居 育儿 宠物 美食 健康 图片

欢迎: kilou\_123 我的博客 发博文 帮助 退出

王祖贤 博客全文 搜索

**Featured Bloggers**

心事如云: 许茹芸

**Featured Posts**

求助: 一分手男友就自虐我该怎么办

[围城内外] 阮小渔: 因为生二胎我和老婆身心疲惫

[情爱现场] 潘小潘: 男友跟我道晚安后约妹子寻欢

[绝对隐私] 茉莉: 老公背着我在网上和别人调情

**Featured Blog Posts**

情感名博答疑

[庄雅婷] 文艺癌患者的病怎么治

[李聊聊] 足球是男女共同的春药

[柳衰彪] 结婚不是给自己交代

[周公子] 拒绝时, 记得“兜”住他的自尊心

[金颖Amala] 对别人的好感到恐惧怎么办?

[周公子] 梁洛施李泽楷复合死穴何在?

[卡玛] 相爱的人不必厮守

[金苑] 如何应对老公外面女人的持续纠缠

晚睡姐姐 Ayawawa 肖军 卡玛

赵格羽 艾小羊 陈保才 留几手

**Featured Blog Posts**

美容达人支招

[T-cissy瑾] 六大招搞定T字区油腻烦恼

[青玉] 三种方法修出完美眉形

[吉米] 初学者入门的7种眼妆画法

[PINKWONG] 眼部护理攻略: 常见问题解答及眼霜

[王萌萌] 学韩国MM妆出稚子脸

[Tenten\_天天] 夏日必备橘子味儿妆容

[小郑郑] 增加香水的特香力的8个方法

[久久妹妹] 十款韩国气垫粉底测评

阿治 Aven 吕选明 Mister鑫 Kevin

张瀚一 冰寒 乔琳 小新 迷你可颂

**Featured Blog Posts**

热门推荐情感

[木子李] 妻子对我不忠诚经常夜不归

[白衣梧桐] 求助: 已婚女爱上未婚男同事该咋办

[飘雨桐] 高考后儿子留女友过夜我该怎么办

[维情迟蕊] 陪嫁房子他就一定会对你好吗?

[飘雨桐] 女生大四产女找工作是否更有优势

[夏七年] 求助: 老公经不起诱惑怎么办?

[故宫蟋蟀] 看了老公偷情视频我见短发女人就想

[阮小渔] 被花心男友伤的支离破碎

木子李 白衣梧桐 郑凡 老丑 吴永麟

赵继才 丁丁 飘雨桐 随意 公子歌

**Featured Blog Posts**

热门推荐时尚

[vanilali] 街拍拾趣: 马球场上的清新小优雅

[赵款款] 每个年龄段的女人都少不了一条连衣

[王馨弘老师] 一件单品多种风格的搭配乐趣

[金老师] 盘点今夏必备潮流单品

[FakeLondon] 倩影流芳: 戛纳电影节最美瞬间(组图)

[月野丸子] 教你把印花长裙穿得恰到好处

[北京吉文服] 闯入巴黎的韩国设计师 JUUN. J

[vanilali] 时尚界奥斯卡红毯 众设计师荟萃一堂

徐峰立 小黛黛 Modish饼 shelly

能豆豆 张小朴 林剑 雌和尚 月野丸子

**微博红人馆**

女性微博 kilou\_123 退出

创建者: 女性博客 成员: 69

作家陈岚: 预防系统工程大、严密、落地。但收效是代偿得益。真正百年树人。但是本国就是不!

童小军: #儿童保护知多少# 儿童保护是一个系统工程。不仅要有针对儿童虐待和忽视伤害发生后的干预系统。更重要的是要有预防儿童虐待和忽视的服务系统。但是, 预防系统建设总是被认为是“昂贵的浪费”, 因为预防就意味着让伤害不要发生, “前测”后测“就无法显示效果。似乎是“白投了”!

15分钟前 转发(3) 评论(1)

12分钟前 转发(1) 评论

雷明: 【不是社会错了, 是你错了】觉得做人累了就看看这些, 不是社会错了, 而是你错了。

**博主检索列表**

Aven	安迪	Ayuki	Ayawawa	艾小羊	阿涛	包小姐	北辰	柏燕燕	春晓	陈保才
陈岚	陈力	陈碧桐	赤雪	都市放牛	邓立	方刚	芙蓉树下	古晨	龚海燕	顾晨曦
洪晃	航悦	黄佟佟	韩火火	何静	黄一琳	靳羽西	金韵蓉	姜汤	孔铭	凯文
蓝怀恩	李艾	李扁	李静	李凯年	李菲	李媛	李玉刚	李丹妮	刘冠廷	刘雯
罗西	兰珍珠	闻丘露薇	卢悦	李亚红	老黑	刘纪辉	雷明	张宁虹	林叶亭	林叶亭
乐嘉	李铁男	凌霜降	老丑	李亚红	林柯彤	罗晓韵	莫万丹	木子李	母其弥雅	牛明昱
平夫	卜柯文	仇明	秋草	乔琳	徐小	蔡一	瘦马	苏芒	舒唱	沈诗棋
SURE	曾普	斯勤	撒点野	单靖雅	陶思璇	田洪禹	天花板	吴小莉	王卯卯	王志中
汪洋	吴琼	巫昂	吴迪	薇薇安	王小坏	王晖越	王静	王潇	王建一	武文
王秋紫	王若伊	晓雪	谢丽华	夏季紫罗兰	小赋赋	许戈辉	香北	夏景	雪小禅	醒小C
小舟	雪松	徐曙光	徐璐菲	小P老师	西楠	徐青林	筱丹	小黑	尹岩	杨瑾
优依	杨澜	杨学涛	杨心远	杨培安	易茗	奕方	易子草	铁宝宝	叶倾城	鱼顺顺
意悠然	亦舒	伊夫	杨凤池	张晓梅	张梓琳	张北川	张立勤	张信哲	张筱雨	张德芬
赵格羽	赵晨池	郑沛芳	茉莉	曾子航	周思敏	朱馥瑜	赵欣瑜	赵款款	郑凡	张曦

快速检索 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Note. Retrieved on 27 December 2011

In this respect, it is worth noting that the whole process followed the logic of Foot and Schneider's (2006) features analysis, rather than that of content analysis. This is because the purpose of content analysis is 'to identify and count the occurrence of specified characteristics or dimensions of texts, and through this, to be able to say something about the messages, images, representations of such texts and their wider social significance' (A. Hansen et al., 1998, p.95). As is already evident, the focus of my study does not rest on the occurrence of online content characteristics.

I developed a simple codebook between 1 January to 15 January 2012 in which I categorised specific coded structural features in order to explore two types of communication action: presentation of the self, and interaction mechanism used with the audience (see Appendix I). This is because, as shown in my literature review, these two dimensions shed light on how individual bloggers use the Internet in ways that enhance or constrain their sociability. I also used the identified defaults of 'archives' and 'categories' to determine the overall purpose of the blog, as these two intrinsic features provided me with a better understanding of the nature of bloggers' posted content. The logic behind this coding was to examine the affordances of blogs for self-expression – an important act for raising awareness of the self on the basis of my literature review. At the same time, I coded for demographic characteristics based on the feature of 'personal information' so as to develop a general sense about who produced the Web material in order to write about topics centred on love, marriage and sexual relationships. I created a schedule on all 59 selected blogs and made revisions accordingly.

#### **5.3.1.2 Women's Groups**

To answer the second research question, I started the exploratory process of identifying websites related to gender equality or women's rights in China, in November 2011. I initially used search engines to locate sites produced by any type of women's group or organisation, but only found two websites: one was produced by the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), and another by Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU). This limited number made me go back to those empirical

studies that focused on organised political action involving the use of the Internet to promote gender equality in China. In this respect, T. Liu's (2008) research on online feminist activism by women organising in mainland China and Hong Kong was quite helpful as it provided me with another eight websites to expand my sample. I then went to the 'external hyperlinks' in each of the already identified websites to see whether I could find more sites. This process ended up adding another seven sites to my sample.

However, this small number still made me doubt whether these 17 websites represented women's organised action in China. To this end, I referred to a document of 'Twenty Key Gender Websites in Chinese' (Feng, 2005), including Hong Kong, Taiwan and mainland China, developed by BRIDGE – a British research and information programme working for worldwide gender equality, dignity, and social justice. The eleven listed sites in mainland China in this document already appeared in my collection. Hence another possibility emerged: perhaps my 17 collected websites were the representatives related to China's gender phenomenon. Following the suggestion of my supervisor, I started with analysis of these 17 websites to begin with, and brought this problem of a 'small sample' into the fieldwork stage, as our assumption was that perhaps I could identify more sites based on advice from my informants.

Thus, my sample consisted of 17 women's groups whose websites were active, with the common goal to further gender equality in China. After a careful reading of the 'About us' section of each website, I categorised them into four types based on their organisational characteristics (see Table 5.1). Among them, two groups were top-down (government-led), nine were bottom-up (at grassroots level), three were university-based forums, and four were research institutions. Although the sample number is limited, the sampled sites still reflect varied organisational characteristics of women's groups in China.

This process also generated a sample of sites for features analysis. In this respect, Foot and Schneider's (2006) coding schedule served as the starting point for developing relevant features and categories in my codebook, but had to be adapted to capture features that are specific to women's groups in the context of China. For example, because of China's political characteristics, I replaced Foot and Schneider's category of 'mobilising' with 'assemblage of women's mobilised activities'.

**Table 5.1 Websites of the seventeen women's groups for Phase I**

	Websites
<b>Top-down/Government-led Groups</b>	
All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)	<a href="http://www.women.org.cn/index.shtml">http://www.women.org.cn/index.shtml</a>
Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)	<a href="http://www.wsic.ac.cn/">http://www.wsic.ac.cn/</a>
<b>Bottom-up/Individual/Grassroots Groups</b>	
Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN)	<a href="http://www.stopdv-china.org:801/stopdv/">http://www.stopdv-china.org:801/stopdv/</a>
Online Feminism in China (FCN)	<a href="http://www.feminist.cn/mos/index.php">http://www.feminist.cn/mos/index.php</a>
Gender and Development in China (GAD)	<a href="http://www.china-gad.org/">http://www.china-gad.org/</a>
Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV)	<a href="http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/">http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/</a>
The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre Beijing (MWPPC)	<a href="http://www.maple.org.cn/">http://www.maple.org.cn/</a>
Rural Women (RW)	<a href="http://www.nongjianv.org/">http://www.nongjianv.org/</a>
West Women (WW)	<a href="http://www.westwomen.org">www.westwomen.org</a>
Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)	<a href="http://www.woman-legalaid.org.cn/">http://www.woman-legalaid.org.cn/</a>
Women Watch in China (WWC)	<a href="http://www.womenwatch-china.org/">http://www.womenwatch-china.org/</a>
<b>University-based Groups</b>	
Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU)	<a href="http://genders.sysu.edu.cn/">http://genders.sysu.edu.cn/</a>
UNESCO Chair at Media and Gender Institute at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC)	<a href="http://mgi.cuc.edu.cn/">http://mgi.cuc.edu.cn/</a>
Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC)	<a href="http://www.38hn.com/">http://www.38hn.com/</a>
<b>Research-oriented Groups</b>	
All Eye Shot (AES)	<a href="http://www.alleyeshot.com/">http://www.alleyeshot.com/</a>
Gender and Public Policy in China (GPPC)	<a href="http://www.xingbie.org/index.asp">http://www.xingbie.org/index.asp</a>
Network of Women/Gender Studies (NWGS)	<a href="http://www.chinagender.org/sky/index.php">http://www.chinagender.org/sky/index.php</a>



This process was also accompanied by reference to Stein's (2009) coding scheme for the analysis of US movement-websites to incorporate additional features and categories into my schedule. For instance, I added the category of 'fundraising and resources'. It should be noted that this was an open coding process which allowed me to include any new features found on my sampled websites. The codebook in this respect is detailed in Appendix II. Following that, on 29 December 2011, I developed my codebook which contained a total of 44 features that should be coded. In the time period between 4 January and 25 January 2012, I used my coding schedule to examine all 17 websites included in my sample of women's groups.

### **5.3.2 Social Network Analysis for Individual Bloggers and Women's Groups**

At the same time, between 20 December and 27 December 2011, I also employed the method of social network analysis to examine not only the relationship patterns of sampled blogs and women's groups, but also prepared case selections for in-depth analysis during the fieldwork phase (Howard, 2002, 2006). As a method, social network analysis involves four defining properties, according to Freeman (2011):

- (1) It involves the intuition that links among social actors are important;
- (2) It is based on the collection and analysis of data that record social relations that link actors;
- (3) It draws heavily on graphic imagery to reveal and display the patterning of those links; and
- (4) It develops mathematical and computational modes to describe and explain those patterns

(Freeman, 2011, p.27)

Therefore, the guiding principle of social network analysis points to relations between actors rather than attributes (Marin & Wellman, 2011, p.13). In this respect, 'social network analysis helps [me to] explore and visualise patterns found within collections of linked entities that include people' (D. Hansen et al., 2010, p.32). Within the method of social network analysis, 'a network is a collection of things and their relationships to one

another. The “things” that are connected are called nodes, vertices, entities, and in some contexts, people. The connections between the vertices are called edges, ties, and links’ (D. Hansen et al., 2010, p.31).

When moving social network analysis to the Internet, attention, not surprisingly, should be paid to hyperlinks – the ‘quintessential feature’ to illustrate ‘the network of networks’ (Lievrouw, 2011, p.10). Following this logic, I analysed the feature of ‘blogroll’ and identified those ‘blog friends’ within my sample via hyperlinks, as well the hyperlink relations between my sampled women’s groups. I entered the data into the NodeXL software, which automatically drew visualisation maps of the relationship patterns for both individual blogs and women’s groups. I also used NodeXL’s incorporated metrics to interpret positions in the identified networks, as they could further help me to select cases for my fieldwork research to come.

### **5.3.3 Reflections and Implications for the Next Phase of the Study**

From Phase I of the study, as I had expected, the major challenge that arose was the application of the methodology to individual bloggers. This is because the method of features analysis proposed by Foot and Schneider is primarily used for the analysis of the Internet’s role in social groups for political communication, instead of for individuals’ social behaviours. However, after some revisions to the coding schedule and codebook drawing on other empirical research on weblogs, the results show that my strategy worked.

During this process, another main finding was that I could use the approach of genre analysis to interpret the characteristics of sampled individual bloggers who articulated their concerns about women’s issues. As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 6, my sample of 59 blogs shared common structural features, primarily for personal expression and social interaction. In addition, an innovative sub-genre of blogs seemed to emerge in my sample: ‘Q&A’ blogs in which the blogger played the role of agony aunt. This can contribute to the existing empirical analyses of ‘weblogs as a genre’, as this has overwhelmingly found that ‘personal journal’ was the most frequent genre for female users.

However, problems occurred when I conducted informal observations by browsing the main page of each blog in the new genre of 'Q&A' blogs, in which I noted down any interesting information during Phase I. It emerged that much attention in the bloggers' posts had been paid to the subject of sensational topics containing such key terms as 'making love', 'loving affair', 'virginity', or 'one-night stand'. This made me doubt the authenticity of their blogs: did they express their genuine voices? Were they using blogs just to publish eye-catching posts to increase click rates? Hence I decided to keep a closer eye on this 'Q&A' genre of blogs and to explore possible answers during my fieldwork. This is because the existence of 'sensational' blogs can provide new insights into my study: do they have empowering effects or not (i.e. to shock the public or to challenge ethical norms for women)?

Another important contribution of Phase I was to redefine and justify my sample selection. According to demographic information, nearly 30 per cent of the blogs were authored by men. Nevertheless, this finding is beyond the scope of the study, as this research aims is to examine the role of empowerment from a woman's perspective. This made me exclude these male bloggers and instead add new women authors to my sample in the final phase of the study. Another reason why I decided to disregard these male blogs was that, based on my observational notes, I found that all of these wrote about sensational topics to do with sex. Hence, this again made me doubt the authenticity of their blogs.

At the same time, I faced another challenge: it was male bloggers who occupied dominant positions in the sphere according to the results of social network analysis. Although this was an interesting phenomenon, I needed to narrow my focus on female bloggers for the purposes of my study. Hence, Phase I of the study on individual bloggers provided signs for the further development of a sampling frame and coding schedule (see Table 5.2), which would be used in the major phase of the study. Meanwhile, it is worth nothing that the elimination of male bloggers would make it rather difficult to select cases for the network ethnography (see Howard, 2002). Following the suggestion of my supervisor, I targeted those female bloggers in a relatively central position, regardless of 'the most central' male bloggers. I also considered choosing cases in the periphery, and those who played the role of 'bridge'. There emerged several bloggers who shared similar

positions in the network map, which made me uncertain 'which would be the most appropriate case'. In this respect, the notes I took down in the process of features analysis were helpful in determining who I should select to conduct my fieldwork research on. Three female bloggers then became my primary candidates for network ethnography:

- one in a central position whom I described as 'an active actor', because, according to my coding schedules of features analysis, she employed all the identified features in her blog
- one in periphery whose uniqueness lay in the fact that she described herself as a 'medium-degree' feminist
- one that served as a 'connector' according to the computerised data (NodeXL)

In addition, I also identified another four bloggers for my 'back-up' list just in case; these four also occupied different positions in the network map.

In terms of women's groups, it seemed that there were no major problems arising in Phase I of the study. The only concern was the small sample size which I discussed earlier (see section 5.2.2). Again, my next step came where I needed to decide which cases I should select for my in-depth research in the field. Initially, I intended to select all 17 cases in my sample, but a closer look at the results of the features analysis and social network analysis suggested that I not consider the three 'research-oriented' groups for the network ethnography. In this respect, it is worth noting that I still kept them for features analysis and social network analysis. This is because they only had informing features and their positions in the network map were not particularly strong; several cases of the other three types of groups shared a similar position with them in the sphere. Hence, this decision would avoid banal data and help me to concentrate on those central and key informants with richer detail (Howard, 2002, p.562).

**Table 5.2 Further directions of the study based on Phase I results**

Category	Further Action	Reason
<b>Characteristics of Blog Authors</b>		
Gender	Delete	The blogs in the final sample were all to be authored by women
Age	Delete	An overwhelming majority of blogs in the pilot sample did not provide this information
Occupation	Keep	
Location	Keep	
<b>Blog Features</b>	Keep	
<b>The Presentation of the Self</b>		
Blogger's Name	Keep	
Blogger's Image	Keep	
Blogger's Connection	Expand	To see whether any new patterns of connection will emerge based on the final sample, due to the exclusion of male bloggers and the inclusion of new female bloggers
<b>Blogging Motivation</b>	Expand	To see whether any new blog types and topics would emerge based on the final sample, due to inclusion of new female bloggers
<b>Interactions with Audiences</b>		
Display of Communication Platforms	Expand	To see if any new communication platforms would emerge based on the final sample
Comments	Expand	To further purposely analyse collected comments to explore how bloggers use comments to interact with readers
Re-posting	Keep	

Category	Further Action	Reason
Network Formation	Expand	The exclusion of male bloggers and inclusion of more female bloggers will result in significant changes in the network

## 5.4 Main Phase of Study II: In-Depth Interviews

As discussed above, according to the results in my Phase I study, I selected potential cases for my resultant fieldwork research inspired by Howard's (2002, 2006) methodology of network ethnography. For individual bloggers, I targeted three female authors (as well as four 'back-up' authors) who were located in the central, periphery, and 'bridge' positions according to the results of social network analysis and features analysis. In terms of women's groups, apart from 'research-oriented' groups, I focused on all of the other 14 groups that belonged to different group types, namely 'top-down/government-led', 'bottom-up/individual/grassroots', and 'university-based' ones.

I then needed to decide which method I should use to conduct my fieldwork research: interviews or participant observation, as they are 'probably the two most prominent methods of data collection in qualitative research' (Bryman, 2012, p.493). While bearing in mind that the aim of my study is to explore the role of the Internet in the process of women's empowerment in China, and I had quite a developed framework to start with, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews as they 'can be directed at that focus and its associated research questions' (Bryman, 2012, p.495). In comparison to participant observation, interviewing is also more flexible and does not have to entail an extended period (Bryman, 2012, p.469).

In addition, given the fact that my potential informants would be women, according to Bryman (2012), the qualitative interview can establish the following and are thus advantageous:

- a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee;
- a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer;
- the perspective of the women being interviewed;
- a non-hierarchical relationship

(Bryman, 2012, p.492)

In what follows, I will explain in greater detail how I conducted in-depth interviewing in the second phase of the study that took place throughout February to April 2012 in China.

#### **5.4.1 Gaining Access: Two Different Stories**

For my research, gaining access proved to be both a positive and negative experience in different situations. Initially, my assumption was that I might encounter difficulties accessing women's groups while access to women's blogs would not be a big problem, because the former is in a relatively closed setting while the latter a relatively open one (see Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2010). On the contrary, the reality of gaining access to women's groups was much easier than that of women bloggers.

For women's groups, my main concern was how to recruit informants from the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), as it is a government unit under the leadership of China's Communist Party (CCP) where 'access is [strictly] controlled by gatekeepers' (Silverman, 2010, p.203). As introduced in Chapter 4, the ACWF also has a large-scale, well-structured and hierarchical system, running from the highest national scale to the lowest village level. This made it more difficult to gain entrance into the ACWF: I did not know where to start. However, there was a turning point in January 2012: by chance, when discussing my PhD project with one of my friends (a Masters student at the University of Westminster), he told me his mother worked for the ACWF at the Henan provincial level, so he could help me gain access. I then started contact via email with his mother, and she agreed to find informants (including herself) who would agree to be interviewed.

After I had secured the access to the ACWF, I turned to the other thirteen groups that I had initially targeted, as described earlier. I followed the section of 'contact information' on each website and sent email to them individually, with a clear explanation of my research and the reason for interviewing. To my surprise, I received a prompt reply from most of the groups, which included the Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC; another of the 'top-down/government-led groups'), and eight of nine 'bottom-up/individual/grassroots' groups.



**Table 5.3 Groups which agreed to in-depth interviews**

Websites	
<b>Top-down/Government-led Groups</b>	
All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)	<a href="http://www.women.org.cn/index.shtml">http://www.women.org.cn/index.shtml</a>
Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)	<a href="http://www.wsic.ac.cn/">http://www.wsic.ac.cn/</a>
<b>Bottom-up/Individual/Grassroots Groups</b>	
Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVNI)	<a href="http://www.stopdv-china.org:801/stopdv/">http://www.stopdv-china.org:801/stopdv/</a>
Online Feminism in China (FCN)	<a href="http://www.feminist.cn/mos/index.php">http://www.feminist.cn/mos/index.php</a>
Gender and Development in China (GAD)	<a href="http://www.china-gad.org/">http://www.china-gad.org/</a>
Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV)	<a href="http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/">http://www.genderwatch.cn:801/</a>
The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre Beijing (MWPCC)	<a href="http://www.maple.org.cn/">http://www.maple.org.cn/</a>
Rural Women (RW)	<a href="http://www.nongjianv.org/">http://www.nongjianv.org/</a>
Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)	<a href="http://www.woman-legalaid.org.cn/">http://www.woman-legalaid.org.cn/</a>
Women Watch in China (WWC)	<a href="http://www.womenwatch-china.org/">http://www.womenwatch-china.org/</a>
<b>University-based Groups</b>	
Sun Yat-Sen University (SYSU): Sex/Gender Education Forum (SGEF-SYSU)	<a href="http://genders.sysu.edu.cn/">http://genders.sysu.edu.cn/</a>
Communication University of China (CUC): UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Media and Gender Institute (UNESCO-MG-CUC)	<a href="http://mgi.cuc.edu.cn/">http://mgi.cuc.edu.cn/</a>

However, I did not receive any reply from West Women (in the 'bottom-up/individual/grassroots' category), or any 'university-based' groups. I then sent emails to these groups again, but still received no reply. To solve this problem, I used my personal networks to access two 'university-based' groups: the UNESCO Chair on Media and

Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC), and the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun-Yat Sen University (SGEF-SYSU). This is because, at that time, Professor Colin Sparks who used to be my second supervisor before he left the University of Westminster, had a good working relationship with the founder of the UNESCO-MG-CUC. As such, he helped me obtain access to this group. In addition, I obtained my bachelor's degree at Sun Yat-Sen University, and one of the founders of the SGEF-SYSU used to be my teacher. I thus contacted her and she introduced me to the main organiser of that group. During this time, I still had not received any reply from West Women and another 'university-based' group, the Women's Study Centre in Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC).

After a Skype meeting with my supervisor, we agreed to exclude these two groups from my interview sample, as the access to other groups I had already gained helped me achieve my research aims. Ultimately, I obtained access to a total of 12 women's groups whose members accepted my face-to-face interview request (see Table 5.3). This 'contact phase' was completed in February 2012 in China.

Conversely, gaining access to women bloggers brought many difficulties. Based on the email address provided on the blogs for my 'first choice' authors, I started to contact them in February 2012. The 'active actor' blogger I contacted, occupying a central position, and the periphery blogger who described herself as a 'medium-degree' feminist both accepted my request: the former agreed to a telephone interview, and the latter to an email interview. However, I received no reply from the 'bridge' blogger. Meanwhile, I also contacted the four 'back-up' bloggers, but they did not respond to my emails. It is worth noting here that the 'active', and 'central' bloggers who initially accepted my interview request then suddenly dodged my calls, QQ instant messages and emails. Thus, as I had only one agreed interviewee at hand, I tried to contact every female author who left their contact information on their blogs (e.g., email, QQ, Weibo, etc.) in my Phase I sample. Only one blogger agreed to be my prospective interviewee, but after several days, she declined my request due to a lack of time. All this made me realise that the bloggers did not like being interrupted by strangers, and that they did not trust me. Finally, I only had one blogger who has accepted an email interview. She called herself Ai Xiaoyang

(pseudonym), a columnist living in the city of Wuhan. She described herself as a 'medium-degree' feminist in her blog and was situated in a peripheral position in the network according to my social network analysis carried out in Phase I. On these difficulties of gaining access to individual bloggers, my supervisor advised me to keep sending emails to them with a clear and honest statement of my research aims. At the same time, we also began to prepare to use supplementary analysis methods based on 'texts' (e.g. textual analysis or discourse analysis) to solve this problem.

However, it is worth noting that there were six more women bloggers who agreed to be interviewed in the end. This happened during my in-depth interviews with members of the selected women's groups: I obtained two additional informants who mentioned that they also used blogs to publicise some information about the groups they are representing. The first interviewee in that respect was Xie Lihua, the founder of the Rural Woman (RW) group, who mainly used her blog to express critical views on current affairs from the perspective of a woman. Another interviewee was Ke Qianting, the main organiser of the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU). She viewed her blog as an open space to share her reflections on changing norms and values about gender in contemporary China. It is also worth noting that Lv Pin, the leading organiser of both Gender and Development in China (GAD) and Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), told me that she used to have an MSN Space to articulate her feminist views on current affairs, but this was later blocked because of its 'sensitive' content. Lv Pin's quotes raised complementary views on China's Internet censorship and the 'sensitive' nature of feminism as introduced in Chapter 4.

In particular, during my fieldwork trip in Zhengzhou, where I conducted a group interview with members of the ACWF at the Henan provincial level in February 2012, one interviewee, Tian Ruijuan, helped me to trace four additional respondents to further increase my sample size of blogger interviewees. Tian introduced me to a group of four women with high levels of education, decent positions, and high income, in their mid-40s. They wrote blogs using the Sina Blog service but operated outside Sina Blog Eladies (SBE). They all had a relatively large number of blog followers and were given the nickname of the 'Green-Red Group' by their readers. They had built up a small virtual community and

solidarity offline relationship via the blogs. I interviewed them as they would present another perspective to broaden my understanding of women's individual blogs.

#### **5.4.2 Preparing the Interview Guide**

For women's groups, I decided to use the form of semi-structured interviewing, as I wanted to explore ideas from the interviewees' point of view. In addition, this approach allowed me to 'ask new questions that follow up interviewees' replies and [to] vary the order and even the wording of questions' (Bryman, 2012, p.470). Given the fact that the groups who had responded to my interview request did not tell me who would be my informants, the interview guide I prepared thus focused on 'general', not specific, informants of a group, mainly drawing on the results of the Phase I study (see Appendix III). Topic areas in my interview guide included:

- (1) the establishment of women's groups in China (the aim of this topic was to discuss my concern about the 'small number' of women's groups that I had found during Phase I);
- (2) the use of the Internet in the group's working activities (including the practices I had identified in Phase I results);
- (3) the organisational characteristics of the group, as well as their relationship with each other, the ACWF and the government (in terms of the ACWF, I would ask about their relationship with other types of women's groups);
- (4) the informants' understanding about empowerment and gender equality in China, and their general idea about the impact of the Internet on women.

On the other hand, as mentioned earlier, before starting the fieldwork interviews, I only had one female blogger, Ai Xiaoyang, who agreed to have an email interview. As such, my interview guide would be specific but in a structured form (see Appendix IV). Towards this end, I re-read Ai Xiaoyang's blog carefully, and noticed that she was not only a 'medium-degree' feminist, but also an 'agony aunt' who often responded to readers' problems on love, marriage and sexual relationships. More importantly, I observed that Ai Xiaoyang's 'Q&A' posts did not contain any sensational key words on sex, contrasting

with some other SBE ‘professional writers’ that I had identified in Phase I. Based on the preliminary results analysed in Phase I, I prepared a list of interview questions that were related to five topic areas:

- (1) the establishment of the women-focussed blogs (e.g., the reason she started blogging; blogging purpose);
- (2) the identity of the agony aunt she played in her blog;
- (3) what is Sina Blog Eladies? (e.g. her view of those sensational blogs I had identified; her relationship with other SBE bloggers; her communication with the audience or commentators);
- (4) the perceptions of the blog’s use in women’s empowerment;
- (5) explanation of why she termed herself a ‘medium-degree’ feminist

In addition, I found that several of her ‘blog friends’ were the same people in my Phase I sample that I had initially planned to gain access to. I tried to use the ‘snowball sampling’ strategy, but Ai Xiaoyang refused my request to do so, simply because I was a stranger to her ‘blog friends’. Overall, I was satisfied with Ai Xiaoyang’s answers that I received on 7 March 2012, but she did not address several questions, stating that they were ‘big questions’. This is one of the common disadvantages of email interviews, which often make it easier for people to avoid answering some questions.

#### **5.4.3 On the Spot: Sampling, Action and Reflections**

Firstly, I will give a factual account of my in-depth interviews pertaining to the selected 12 women’s groups in the cities of Zhengzhou, Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou from February to April 2012 in China. My interview sample was neither based on ‘random sampling’ nor ‘purposive sampling’, since I knew who my informants were once I arrived to the arranged interview venues. Bryman (2012) calls this situation ‘convenience sample’ – ‘when members of an organisation select interviewees rather than give the researcher a free rein to do so’ (p.418). Thus, it was quite challenging as I had to make a quick ‘mental’

adjustment to the prepared question guide prior to each interview, according to first impressions and ‘phatic’ information (e.g. what I was doing in the group) the interviewees gave, and the forms they preferred (one-to-one or group interviews).

Finally, I conducted 12 one-to-one and 3 group interviews with a total of 22 board members from the selected women’s groups. In particular, for those group interviews, my strategy was to let participants discuss my prepared topics. In other words, I carried out ‘interviews with a number of individuals simultaneously’ (Bryman, 2012, p.500). The interviews ranged from one hour to almost three hours; a list of interviewees is provided in Appendix V. Most interviews took place in the offices of the interviewees’ groups, and others in coffee shops. I taped all of my interviews, after asking for permission. Before initiating the interviews, I invited every informant to sign a consent form. All interviews were conducted in Chinese. The informants shed light on their perceptions of women’s empowerment, and the application of the Internet in their work activities. They also provided contextual information about women’s groups and the development of gender equality in China, as well as the purposes of setting-up a website.

Throughout the interviews, my informants confirmed my assumption that the number of women’s groups in China was limited. They also told me that it was only my sampled groups that formed a ‘small circle’ to promote gender equality. Meanwhile, I was invited to join two groups’ email lists, five groups’ Weibo platforms, two groups’ newsletters, and two groups’ online discussion platforms via QQ. I also collected four group brochures, official documents and publications during my fieldwork trip. All this helped me to become more familiar with the status quo of women’s groups in China and their use of the Internet.

As mentioned earlier, in the process of my interviews with members of selected women’s groups, two informants told me that they were using blogs due to the semi-structured interviewing form used. This encouraged me to probe their use of blogs more deeply in the course of the interviews, which formed an integral part of my study’s findings on women’s blogs afterwards.

In terms of the additional women bloggers of the Green-Red Group, the list of questions for them was drawn from the interview guide I had prepared for Ai Xiaoyang,

but was enriched with questions relating to several new themes emerging from my reading of their blogs prior to the interviews (see Appendix VI). The key information I gathered from interviews within the Green-Red Group was that those bloggers writing about sensational topics were commercially-professional writers employed by Sina editors to increase online traffic. This further justified my decision to exclude male bloggers from my final sample.

In addition, participants in my group interview with the UNESCO-MG-CUC recommended that I needed to study Li Yinhe's blog, as she is renowned as the first female sociologist in sexual studies, and an activist for LGBT rights (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) in China. I tried to contact her via Weibo and left comments on her blog (she did not provide an email address on her blog) explaining my research interests and requesting an interview, but again I did not receive a response from her.

Therefore, I also made the decision to include those blogs authored by the six additional informants I had obtained, as well as Li Yinhe's blog, in the final study of women's blogs in terms of features analysis and social network analysis. During this whole process of fieldwork research, those female bloggers in my Phase I sample whom I kept contacting via email still ignored my interview requests. At this point, I decided not to try to seek access to them, as I already had an email interview from Ai Xiaoyang that provided her perceptions of a blog as an 'insider' of the Sina Blog Eladies (SBE). In addition, the four female members of the 'Green-Red Group' could provide their views as 'outsider bloggers' of SBE, and the two informants from the women's groups could provide new insights into my understanding about 'political' blogs authored by women. Although it was impossible to arrange an interview with Li Yinhe, I could instead conduct in-depth analysis of her numerous texts on the blog. As Fairclough (2003) notes, 'texts as elements of social events have causal effects – i.e. they bring about changes. Most immediately, texts can bring about changes in our knowledge' (p.8). After my fieldwork research, I had also developed a better understanding about the role of weblogs in the processes of women's empowerment. This encouraged me to then include fashion, beauty and health blogs in my final study, as I realised that these could reveal different angles to make my research more comprehensive.

#### **5.4.4 Analysing the Interview Data**

I started transcribing my interviews in May 2012 after I returned to London. Although it was time-consuming, 'transcription quality should not be neglected' (Silverman, 2010, p.200). This is because extracts from interview data contribute to the answering of the researcher's questions (Silverman, 2010, p.200). Due to the fact that the total number of my interviews was not very high, I transcribed them all in Microsoft Word and imported the data (each interview in a single file) into NVivo. All the transcribed data was in Chinese. I created 'nodes' according to identified themes emerging from the interview data in the coding process in June 2012. All the coded 'nodes' were categorised into two 'sets': women's groups and women's blogs. I then employed the technique of thematic analysis to construct thematic networks for each interview of women's groups and women's blogs, and documented them in the software MindNode. According to Attride-Stirling (2001), thematic networks are 'web-like illustrations (networks) that summarise the main themes constituting a piece of text' (p.386). These thematic networks provided me with a vivid sense of my interview data, which helped me to select what extracts to include in my thesis. In this respect, it is worth noting that I only translated those quotes that appeared in my thesis into English. I also compared the developed thematic networks with the categories in the features analysis, as well as the network map based on social network analysis, aiming to integrate them together and present them in my results chapters.

#### **5.4.5 Reflections on the Role of a Researcher during Interviews**

Throughout the whole process of in-depth interviews, I played a researcher role in order to build rapport with the respondents, since this was 'less intrusive in people's lives' (Bryman, 2012, p.496). The level of my involvement was neither 'a detached outsider observer' nor 'an intimately involved insider participant' (Neuman, 2014, p.445). I was not an 'outsider', as I had conducted systematic features analysis and social network analysis to become familiar with 'who they are' and 'what they are doing'. However, at the same time, I was not an 'insider', because I was neither a friend of those bloggers I



interviewed nor a 'complete member/participant' (Neuman, 2014, p.445) in the women's groups who accepted my interview requests.

To begin with, this 'neutral' position made me think about how would I gain trust from those informants who had agreed to accept my interview requests, as the 'contact phase' was not facilitated by face-to-face communication. In line with the ethical requirements of my status as a PhD student, I provided them with my real identity by introducing my full name, gender, university affiliation, and my PhD role. I also used my email account from the University of Westminster, not my personal email account, to contact them, to present them with my authentic academic role. My other strategy was to 'show my genuine concern for and an interest' (Neuman, 2014, p.451) in them. Hence in my emails, I clearly stated my research aims in a long paragraph and used the word 'we' to bridge the distance with them. In particular, I emphasised the sense of 'we-ness' as 'women': the intention behind this was to show them 'we were in the same group', and also to show that 'I totally sympathise with them'. Based on the outcomes of my 'contact phase' at least, I gained trust from most of my sampled groups, but very little from bloggers. It should also be noted that the importance of personal networks cannot be neglected, which bridged the gap when nurturing trust.

However, the real challenge came from the field sites where I carried out my face-to-face interviews with those respondents. How would I develop rapport with them so that they could trust me enough to air their views? In this respect, I tried to show them my friendliness and paid careful attention to eye contact. Hence, in the course of my interviews, I tried to avoid taking notes and did not place my interview guide in front of them. This is because these two things would signal that I was just working for my PhD thesis instead of showing 'genuine concern' and real interest. Although taking notes had been commonly accepted as an important strategy to obtain additional information, based on my actual experience, this activity could change the interviewing situation to another type – one where 'you talk I note down', without any psychological communication due to a lack of eye contact.

In the course of the interviews, I always started with a brief introduction of my research aims, the purpose of my interview, and my current knowledge about the group

they belonged to. This could further facilitate the establishment of rapport with them. I also pointed out the problems I observed related to women, to the Internet, or to society at large, and encouraged them to give me possible explanations. For interviewees from women's groups, these opening-up questions would allow them to naturally discuss their role in the process of furthering gender equality in China, as well as talk about their experiences of using the Internet. I did not strictly follow the sequence of my prepared questions. What I did instead was to follow their talk flows and try to find an appropriate moment to ask questions that they had not addressed. Most of their free talks were related to my questions, so I did not repeat them. For the informants within 'Green-Red Group', our interviews were more like serious conversations. My strategy to develop rapport with them was to let them talk about the specific posts on their blogs that struck me.

In addition, I also noticed my personal background had its advantages and disadvantages, which was particularly evident in my interviews with members from 'top-down/government-led', and those from 'bottom-up/individual/grassroots', and 'university-based' groups. For the interviewees from the former type, my PhD role in a Western university made it impossible to obtain critical views from them, but they provided detailed accounts of gender equality in the context of China. In addition, being a young woman rendered my position a 'learner', since those interviewees tended to play a tutor or lecturer role with very little discussion. On the contrary, the interviewees from the latter two types of groups talked much more critically, freely, and equally. This is because my PhD project could let the groups they represented be visible to the outside world, especially to Western countries. They thought this was a good vehicle to let their voices be heard by more people. In addition, they were quite surprised that I shared an interest with them and paid attention to their work because of my young age. Thus, they were all willing to talk more.

### **5.5 Main Phase of Study III: Revisiting Features Analysis and Social Network Analysis**

After I completed the analysis of my interview data, I developed a clear idea of how to revise the coding schedule of features analysis for both women bloggers and women's

groups that I prepared in the first phase of my study. This is because I became more familiar with the research settings and research problems that I had chosen, and I had gained a better knowledge of the context with regards to women and the Internet in China. Thus, to ensure the accuracy of my final study, I re-inspected women's blogs and the websites of women's groups from January through July of 2013. Such re-examination was particularly important to women's blogs, as I would include weblogs on fashion, health and beauty in my SBE sample, and I had obtained additional and complementary data from another seven non-SBE bloggers. Another reason that I had decided to carry out my examination again was because I had observed that most of my sampled women's groups updated their websites in design, layout and some other aspects of the content immediately after I finished my fieldwork. In what follows, I will present how I improved and completed my empirical study based on the results of the first phase of my study and the analysis of interview data.

### **5.5.1 Women's Blogs**

One of the biggest challenges in the final phase of my study was still centred around women's blogs, as, apart from the new cases in my sample, I had gathered a mix of quantitative and qualitative data at this point. Therefore, the main aim of the final phase of my study on women's blogs was to make this quantitative and qualitative data 'talk to' each other. In this multi-method process, I needed to draw particular attention to the integration of these two strands, especially deciding 'which has priority – the quantitative or the qualitative data?' (Bryman, 2006, p.98).

#### **5.5.1.1 *Sampling***

Based on Phase I research and fieldwork interviews, I decided to include four types of source data into the final sample: women bloggers in SBE, blogs authored by two board members of some women's groups (Xie and Ke), 'Green-Red Group', and Li Yinhe's blog. My first task was to re-collect data from SBE; I had decided to exclude male bloggers from the final sample and would add weblogs on fashion, beauty and health. At that time, I firstly excluded those women authors in my Phase I sample who had not updated their

blogs after I started my fieldwork research in February 2012. To put back those 48 fashion, beauty and health blogs I had collected, I also excluded those ‘non-active’ authors. Finally, I re-located blogs in the homepage of SBE in early June 2013 to include more cases in my sample. This time, I only chose those blogs which were single-authored by women based on their profile photos and personal information, but I did not select the blogs which did not include information on gender. On 5 June 2013, I created my final SBE sample of 88 blogs.

Therefore, my final sample of women’s blogs consisted of 88 SBE blogs, two activist blogs (from women’s groups), four blogs from the ‘Green-Red Group’, and one pioneer blog (Li Yinhe).

#### ***5.5.1.2 Features Analysis***

Firstly, I decided to mix all blogs I had collected for features analysis regardless of their different labelled categories. This is because ‘the weblogs as a genre’ has become a commonly accepted fact in academic research, and the results of my Phase I study also convinced me in this respect. My primary unit of analysis was the front page of a blog.

Between 6 June and 16 June 2013, I revised the coding schedule that I had developed in Phase I (see Appendix VII). For instance, to have a better understanding of online self-presentation dynamics, I reorganised identified features and captured new features to address the communication actions of ‘display of the self’, ‘promotion of the self’, and ‘connections of the self’. Following the suggestion of my supervisor, I drew attention to those features that facilitated communication between the blogger and the audiences (i.e. comments in the category of ‘blog interactivity’).

At the same time, in the course of updating the codebook, I also decided to use the entire blog as a second unit of analysis for ‘blog topics’ due to the new cases included in my final sample; they did not exclusively address topics on love, marriage, and sexual relationships as my sampled blogs in Phase I had. I needed to show more details about what individual women were blogging about. During the rest of June 2013, I analysed all the blogs in my final sample based on the revised coding scheme.

#### **5.5.1.3 Social Network Analysis**

I again employed the method of social network analysis in July 2013, yet, at this point, the aim was not to select cases for in-depth interviews. At that point, the purpose of the social network analysis was to examine the network structure of the SBE women's blogs. My assumption was that the appearance of the 88 bloggers in SBE was based on their shared interest in women's issues, which would result in very likely in the possibility of making relations via hyperlinks. In addition, SBE editors provide them with the opportunity of being visible to each other by listing them in the homepage. More importantly, due to my elimination of male-authored blogs, I wanted to discover new patterns in the network, as the pilot results showed that it was three men who held the strongest position. However, it is worth noting that the hyperlink connection that I drew attention to was SBE bloggers within my sample, instead of their connections with acquaintances or interested bloggers beyond my sample. I traced the hyperlink data through 'blogrolls'.

I also inspected blogrolls of those seven non-SBE bloggers to see if I would find any connections between them and those SBE ones, although this possibility was rather low. I then found something interesting: one member Lv Jing of 'Green-Red Group' had established hyperlink connections with several SBE bloggers including Ai Xiaoyang (the blogger who accepted my email interview). This would provide me new insights to understand the communicative affordances of the hypertextual architecture of the Internet.

#### **5.5.1.4 Additional Methods for Data Analysis and Interpretation I: Discourse Analysis**

Based on the first phase of the study, I analysed how the blogs in my sample could be defined as a weblog genre in terms of shared structural features, forms and a common communication purpose. In addition, I identified authors in my sample that mainly used blog posts as a 'personal journal' or 'Q&A' platform to answer readers' problems on love, marriage, and sexual relationships. The explanation of this phenomenon is, as Paltridge (2012) points out, that 'genres are dynamic and open to change' (p.66), and 'the use of one genre may assume or depend on the use of a number of other interrelated genres' (p.68).

In a similar vein, both Yates and Orlikowski (1992) and Fairclough (2003) share the belief that one of the difficulties with the notion of genre is its inherently different levels of abstraction. This means that ‘in each case, the variants derived from the more general type differ primarily by being more specific in subject and form’ (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992, p.303). Fairclough (2003) uses the term of ‘pre-genre’ for ‘the most abstract categories [...]’, ‘disembedded genre’ for somewhat less abstract categories [...], and ‘situated genre’ for genres which are specific to particular networks of practices’ (p.69).

In line with this enquiry, I decided to use the method of discourse analysis to further interpret the data I had collected from features analysis to elaborate on what genre topic genres of the weblog posts are produced by the women authors in my final sample. The philosophy I followed is Fairclough’s (2003) framework of discourse analysis on the basis of ‘the assumption that language is an irritable part of social life, dialectically interconnected with other elements of social life, so that social analysis and research has to take account of language’ (p.2). Thus, as a method, according to Paltridge (2012):

Discourse analysis examines patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysis also considers the ways that the use of language presents different views of the world and different understandings. It examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations. It also considers how views of the world, and identities, are constructed through the use of discourse.

(Paltridge, 2012, p.2)

In the case of my research, I focused on the ‘discourse structure of texts’ (Paltridge, 2012, p.4), as ‘genres are the specifically discursive aspect of ways of acting and interacting in the course of social events’ (Fairclough, 2003, p.65).

Based on this work, I developed a guide to help analyse the communication action embedded in ‘the overall (“generic”) structure of a text’ (Fairclough, 2003, p.69). Drawing on the work of Fairclough (2003), Herring et al. (2005), and Lehti (2011), I mapped out four categories in the guide: activity, subject, form and role of the audience:

- activity: ‘what are bloggers doing?’ – purpose
- subject: ‘what are bloggers talking about?’ – blog topics
- form: ‘how is the text structured or organised?’
- audiences: ‘who will read the blog?’

I used these four categories to interpret how women use blogs to articulate their voices from the perspective of genres, since genres are a useful analytic tool to understand people’s communicative practices. I started with content (‘topics’) – a helpful pointer to explore the nature of the blogs (purpose). Throughout the process of re-browsing the first page of posts stored in ‘archives’ by focusing on their addressed topics, I could additionally analyse the generic structure of the texts and the general idea of ‘imagined audience’ in the bloggers’ mind. I will explain on this in greater detail in Chapter 6.

#### ***5.5.1.5 Additional Methods for Data Analysis and Interpretation II: Content Analysis***

Meanwhile, I realised that building social networks with audiences could be served as an important signal to investigate whether weblogs could be used for the empowerment of female bloggers. In this respect, I turned my attention to the comments section. This is because the posted comments might hint at the ways in which the sampled female bloggers constructed a dialogue with readers as well as the development of collective narratives towards specific issues.

Hence, I conducted content analysis to investigate the comments posted on the top ten most popular SBE blogs to investigate how readers use comments to interact with bloggers. These included 479 comments on the first screenshot of the most commented entry in each selected popular blog between April and June 2013. These ten blogs cover all of the identified six types of blog topics, and are representative of the five genres (see Chapter 6). At the same time, I analysed how readers react to the issues of concern about women/gender raised in the blogs authored by the two activist women (Xie and Ke) and one pioneer (Li Yinhe). These include 118 messages on the first screenshot of the three

women's most commented posts, as well as 14 from Xie Lihua's 'leaving message on the main page' section (the only person who included this feature in her blog). For 'Green-Red Group', I employed the same technique to analyse a total of 120 comments. The themes for my content analysis were based on the coding categories developed by Lövheim (2013a).

### **5.5.2 Women's Groups**

In comparison to women's blogs, the revision work on the websites of the seventeen women's groups was much easier. The main reason for this was that I did not need to include any additional cases in my sample according to my fieldwork research. My main task was therefore to capture new features and reorganise them, alongside the 'old' ones developed in Phase I, into my updated coding schedule in which the previous categories were revised (see Appendix VIII). In this process, I paid particular attention to language use, as to date there were no accurate English terms that could describe some aspects of my research corresponding with 'Chinese features'. This was not merely a matter of translation. In that respect, I borrowed some terms from Yang's work – one of the expert researchers focusing on Internet activism in China. In early January 2013, I finished the revision of features analysis pertaining to the websites of the 17 sampled women's groups. I also revised the typology of women's groups in Phase I based on my better understanding of women's groups in China. Given the fact that two groups – the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and Rural Women (RW) – updated their external hyperlinks, I needed to re-examine the hyperlink connections within my sampled groups. According to the results of social network analysis, there were no 'big' changes to the overall network structure. I will explain all of these in greater detail in Chapter 7.

In addition, it is worth noting that the reason I did not analyse the websites of women's groups as a genre was because of the low number in the sample. As Yates and Orlikowski (1992) notes, the constituents of a genre should have 'similar substance and form and taken in response to recurrent situations', which depends on a large sample to be analysed. On the other hand, the identified features presented in Chapter 7 exhibit the tendency to count them as markers of a genre of websites. At the same time, the interviews



show that women's groups in general would like to develop their websites as a sub-genre of portal sites and they were working in this way. Therefore, it is possible to indicate that this potential – 'websites of women's groups as a genre' – existed, but this went beyond the scope of the present study. Based on the outlined methodological framework, the following two chapters report on the results of this study from the vantage point of Chinese female bloggers and women's groups, respectively.

## Chapter 6 Female Bloggers and Self-Empowerment

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Focusing on female Chinese bloggers, this chapter explores the potential as well as the constraints of weblogs in the process of women's self-empowerment, by looking at awareness of the self, identity projection, and the organisation of personal networks. More specifically, from the vantage point of female bloggers, this chapter answers the first research question:

**RQ1:** What is the role of women's blogs in the process of women's empowerment in China?

- How do female bloggers use their weblogs in the process of performing their identity, connecting with others and developing their interpersonal networks, as well as expressing themselves about the issues that concern them?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of blogs in this process?

To set the background for this analysis, this chapter begins with a brief introduction of who the selected female bloggers are.

### 6.1 A Brief Introduction of the Sampled Female Bloggers

In this respect, the final sample in my study is composed of 88 blogs from Sina Blog Eladies (SBE), two activist women's blogs (details of which were obtained from the women's groups in my study), one blog authored by the most well-known pioneer in gender studies in China, and four bloggers (Green-Red Group) introduced to me during my fieldwork by one of my interviewees from a women's group. The empirical data is primarily derived from features analysis of these selected blogs, as well as social network analysis of their relations with each other. In addition, I conducted one email interview with one SBE author and six face-to-face interviews with the two activist women and the four Green-Red Group bloggers. This data is further complemented by textual analysis of users' comments posted in the ten most popular SBE blogs and the remaining non-SBE blogs.



Upon initial examination, I pertained features analysis to all of the blogs in the sample (N=95) and found that they could choose templates, colours, font types and two- to four-column formats provided by the blog hosting service in order to customise and personalise the main page (see Figure 6.1). In addition, the blogging software used offers the sampled female authors an array of structural features to create their own blogs, including a profile, search, categories, archives, comments, photo album, background music, blogroll, and RSS. Finally, the blogging platform automatically generates information about the 'number of visitors and followers' and 'number of post views and comments'. All of the blogs in the sample do not lack an audience and commentators.

The 88 SBE blogs were selected from editors' listings of featured blogs, top-ranked blogs, and an incomplete directory that updates from time to time. Most of these bloggers wrote about their personal life, fashion and beauty, and love, marriage and sexual relationships. Among them, only about half mentioned their residential location, and most of them lived in major cities in China, such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. In addition, the most frequent occupation by far disclosed was a journalist psychological consultant, fashion professional, or writer/freelancer. In addition, nearly half of the SBE blogs were labelled as 'verified' accounts, with the appearance of the 'V' badge on their pages. The owners of these 'V' blogs were key individuals in the key interest areas of fashion, media, journalism, and education, as well as authenticated by SBE editors. In this way, they needed to upload real photos of themselves to meet the verification criteria. Based on their profile images, most of them were women around or under 30s (they did not disclose information about their age). In the whole SBE cohort, only 12 bloggers mentioned that there were born after 1980s. This is the first type of women's blog, titled '**SBE blogs**', in my study.

At the same time, seven non-SBE bloggers were identified during a fieldwork visit to China in 2012. These blogs were also included in the sample. Among these bloggers were four women in their mid-40s, all with high levels of education, high salaries, and good job positions, who collectively had been given the nickname of the '**Green-Red Group**' by their readers. These four women had managed to build up a small virtual community

among themselves and solid offline relationships via their blogging activities. In addition, they all lived in the capital city of Henan Province, Zhengzhou.

Two additional female bloggers were included, coming from two women's 'civic associations' (see Methodology and section 7.1): Xie Lihua (in mid-60s; living in Beijing) – the group founder of Rural Women in Beijing, and Ke Qianting (in late-30s; living in Guangzhou) – one of the core organisers of the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University. Both of these women use blogs to present their own personal ideas, opinions and views on gender politics. I have labelled these participants '**women activists**'.

The final blogger involved in the study was Li Yinhe (aged 64; living in Beijing) – the first female sociologist to discuss sexuality in China. Her blog is widely recognised as an important space for challenging traditional values and norms related to women and gender stereotypes. Often writing posts to defend the rights of gay, lesbian and transgender people, Li Yinhe is referred to in this study as the '**pioneer**' in terms of blogging about gender-related issues.

**Table 6.1 Blog age and recency of updates**

	<b>SBE Blogs (n=88)</b>	<b>Non-SBE Blogs</b>
<b>Blog Age</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less than 2 years (13/14.8%)</li> <li>• Between 2-4 years (16/18.2%)</li> <li>• Between 4-6 years (19/21.6%)</li> <li>• More than 6 years (40/45.5%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Activist Women (n=2)</b> Ke Qianting: 4 years; Xie Lihua: &gt; 6 years</li> <li>• <b>Pioneer (n=1)</b> Li Yinhe: &gt; 6 years</li> <li>• <b>Green-Red Group (n=4)</b> all members: 4-6 years</li> </ul>
<b>Recency of Updates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Couple of times per day (4/4.5%)</li> <li>• Once per day (12/13.6%)</li> <li>• Couple of times per week (33/37.5%)</li> <li>• Couple of times per month (27/30.7%)</li> <li>• Once per month or less (12/13.6%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Activist Women (n=2)</b> both Ke and Xie: once per month or less</li> <li>• <b>Pioneer (n=1)</b> Li Yinhe: couple of times per month</li> <li>• <b>Green-Red Group (n=4)</b> all members: couple of times per month</li> </ul>

Therefore, based on the limited demographic information provided in the blogs, a majority of my sampled female bloggers lived in urban environment and worked within professional occupations. This is particularly evident in the non-SBE cohort (Green-Red Group, 'women activists', and 'pioneer'). These indicators also suggest that most of the female bloggers had proper educational status. On the other hand, age did not play an important role in the blogging practices among them, as many SBE bloggers withheld this information while all the non-SBE bloggers were not young women. All of the sampled women devote a considerable amount of time to maintaining their blogs over an extended period, and most of them update their blog on a regular basis. As Table 6.1 shows, the overall age of blogs in the present sample of SBE blogs is old, with 45.5 per cent being more than six years old. Similarly, the non-SBE blogs were generally old too, as all of them were more than four years old.

In terms of 'recency of updates', 37.5 per cent of the SBE blogs were updated a 'couple of times per week', followed by a 'couple of times per month' (30.7 per cent), 'once per day' (13.6 per cent), 'once per month or less' (13.6%) and a 'couple of times per day' (4.5 per cent). It is likely that the majority of SBE blogs appear to be actively maintained. In contrast, non-SBE authors demonstrated a weaker commitment to blogging in terms of the recency of updates. This, according to the interviewees, may be due to the busy work schedule of these authors, as maintaining the blog with good-quality articles needs a substantial amount of time.

## **6.2 Self-Expression Online and Women's Awareness of the Self**

Through narrating different issues within and beyond routines of their personal lives, my analysis shows that the studied female bloggers have considered self-expression the primary benefit obtained from the practice of online writing. As one Green-Red Group blogger said: 'It is just because of blogs that I began to document my thoughts and travel stories...I really love travelling...' (Zhang Ping, Personal Interview, 21February 2012). In this respect, beyond dairy keeping and personal documents, they conceived weblogs as a means of seeking self-reflection and developing a 'new sense of self' (Giddens, 1991).

On the surface, the weblogs afforded female authors a great opportunity to give expression to a plurality of topics closely associated with their physical experience. Table 6.2 presents the distribution of the major topics under discussion in my sample of 88 SBE blogs, as well as the main themes of each of the seven non-SBE blogs, categorised under three identified blogger-types (i.e. women activists, pioneer and Green-Red Group). It is worth noting here that nearly half of all SBE blogs (44.3 per cent) refer to a set of major subjects around which the author writes, rather than focusing exclusively on one topic.

**Table 6.2 Major topics in the sample of SBE and non-SBE blogs**

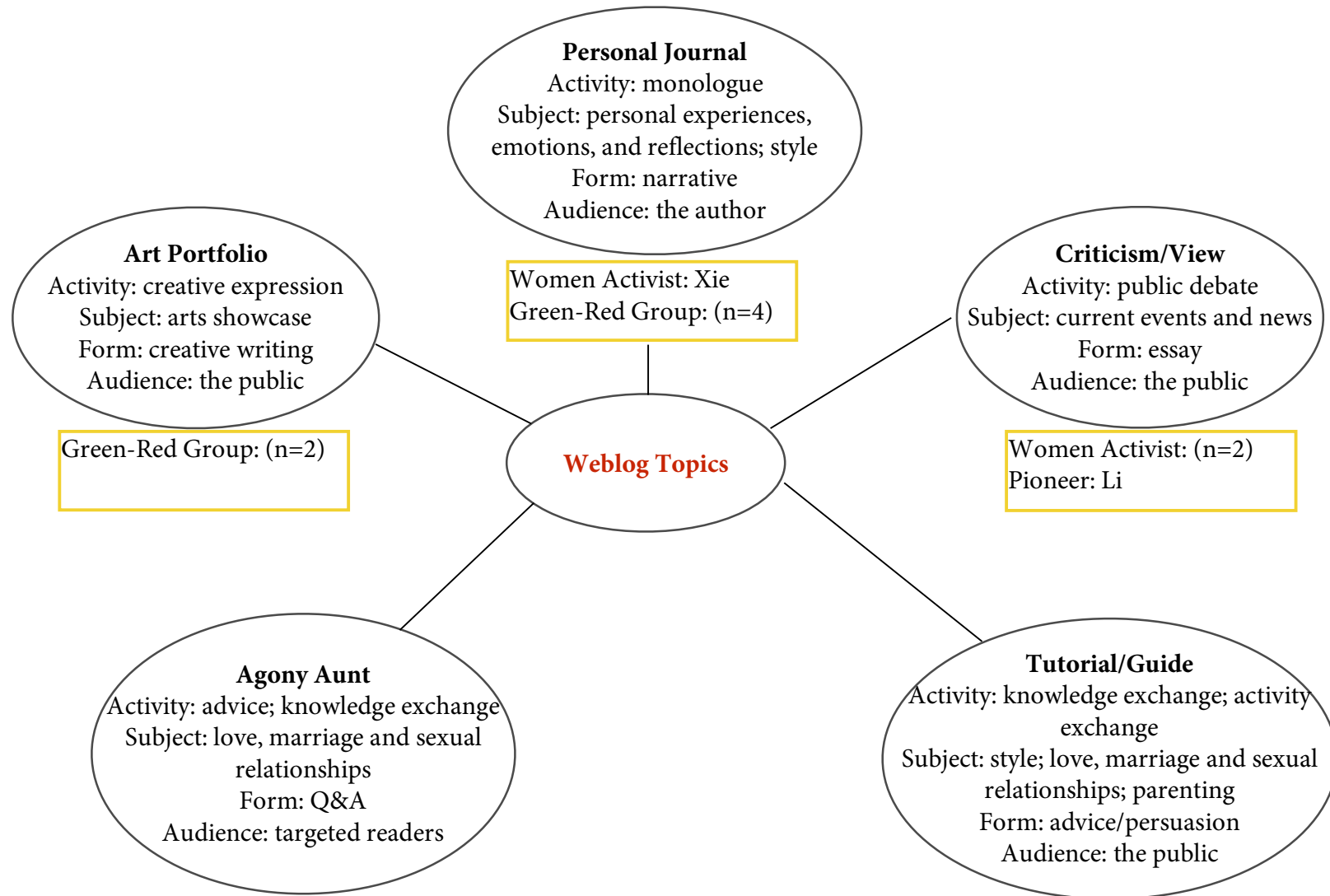
	Topics		
		F	Per Cent
SBE Blogs	Style	40	45.5
	Personal experiences, emotions, and reflections	39	44.3
	Love, marriage, and sexual relationships	35	39.8
	Current events and news	10	11.4
	Parenting	5	5.7
	Arts showcase	4	4.5
		<b>N=88</b>	<b>(% of total)</b>
Non-SBE Blogs	<i><b>Women Activists (n=2)</b></i>		
	<i><b>Ke:</b></i> gender politics	-	-
	<i><b>Xie:</b></i> personal experiences and reflections on the workplace/work; gender politics	-	-
	<i><b>Pioneer (n=1)</b></i>		
	<i><b>Li:</b></i> gender politics and sexual rights; current events and news; book/movie reviews (related to gender and sexuality)	-	-
	<i><b>Green-Red Group (n=4)</b></i>		
	<i><b>Lv:</b></i> personal experiences, emotions and reflections; book reviews (general)	-	-
	<i><b>Zhao:</b></i> see above	-	-
	<i><b>Zhang:</b></i> her own poems	-	-
	<i><b>Wang:</b></i> personal experiences, emotions and reflections; book reviews (general); prose, her own poems and novels	-	-

As seen in the table below, particular focus on topics related to ‘style’, such as fashion, beauty, fitness and lifestyle, can be found in 45.5 per cent of the *SBE blogs*, followed by ‘personal experiences, emotions, and reflections’ (44.3 per cent), and ‘love, marriage and sexual relationships’ (39.8 per cent). Not surprisingly, only ten blogs present observations on, and evaluations of, ‘current events and news’ by the authors (11.4 per cent). In addition, blogs covering the topic of ‘parenting’ accounts for only 5.7 per cent of the SBE blogs, while ‘arts showcase’ topics (i.e. displaying the author’s drawings, photographs, calligraphy, etc.) are the least frequent, accounting for only 4.5 per cent.

More importantly, the practice of writing on a weblog platform reflects not only female bloggers’ capacity for self-expression, but also the underlying specific communicative purposes, i.e. what they are blogging for. In this respect, five strategies could be discerned from the discourse analysis of the sampled authors’ blog topics: (1) personal journal, (2) agony aunt, (3) tutorial guide, (4) criticism/viewpoint, and (5) art portfolio (see Figure 6.2). In what follows, considered alongside Chinese cultural values and social norms, the analysis looks at the extent to which the studied female authors opened up their blogs as spaces for framing themselves as women with agency.



Figure 6.2 Emerging topic genres



### 6.2.1 Personal Journal: Being a Storyteller

As with other research on the purposes of writing blogs (e.g. Herring et al., 2005; Rettberg, 2014), the results in my study also showed that the ‘personal journal’ was a popular topic genre that compelled female bloggers to document their everyday lives and to seek self-reflection in a monologue style. This is mainly due to the fact that nearly half of the *SBE* bloggers (44.3 per cent) wrote topics related to ‘personal experiences, emotions, and reflections’. In addition, all of the members of the *Green-Red Group* used their blogs to describe personal feelings and random thoughts, to share travel stories, to write book reviews (not for any commercial purpose), or to talk about work. Occasionally, the *woman activist* Xie Lihua<sup>10</sup> documented her personal reflections on issues related to her physical experience.

Within the genre of ‘personal journal’, similar to diary keeping, the basic content narrated ‘what happened in my day?’, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

Today I can finally have a rest. [emoticon]

Recently I’ve been bloody busy moving house.

Watched the movie ‘Aftershock’ – no surprise, I cried from the beginning to the end...

But I forgot to bring tissues... [emoticon]

What can I use to wipe my nose and tears? [...]

(Posted by ‘ayuki’, 30 July 2010)

This writing style was prevalent across the sample of *SBE* female authors when focusing on the blog topic of ‘personal journal’– that is, being a storyteller to show their personal lives and sentiments to the public. For these bloggers, keeping a diary was no longer a ‘secret’ practice, but was done to expose themselves. For Chinese women, choosing to show their everyday lives to a mass audience is significant, because within the Confucian framework, a woman’s role is confined to the domestic

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<sup>10</sup> However, the majority of Xie Lihua’s postings addressed the topic of ‘gender politics’. I will explain this point in more detail in a later section.

sphere and she is not allowed to form ‘a public self’ (see also Chapter 4). In this respect, weblogs could provide a new means for Chinese women to engage with society simply through exposing their personal lives to the public.

On the other hand, the results found that a reinforcement of Chinese male/female norms was expressed in many SBE postings in relation to the topic of ‘personal experiences, emotions, and reflections’. The following two excerpts illustrate this point:

**Excerpt 1:**

Men – young, handsome, but lowborn, no names. Are there any shortcuts for them to a bright future with wealth and a happy marriage with a beautiful wife?

In the history of literature, three handsome guys chose a shortcut, but their life endings were totally different because of their personal characters. The first handsome guy, Julien Sorel, from *Le Rouge et le Noir*, written by Stendhal [...] The second handsome guy, Lucien Chardon, from Balzac’s *Illusions Perdues* [...] And the final handsome guy, Georges Duroy, from Maupassant’s *Bel Ami* [...]

(Posted by ‘Huang Tongtong’, 30 March 2013)

**Excerpt 2:**

One day, one of my friends asked me: ‘What is the perfect femininity in your mind?’

Why ask me such a question? Even Leo Tolstoy and Victor Hugo could not write a *perfect* woman...But after a while, I told my friend: ‘Life is an ongoing process, so it is difficult for a woman to behave *perfectly*. She must have a down moment. So the perfect woman in my mind is a woman who knows how to get along with herself, who knows her own weakness, who has an optimistic spirit. Even if she fell down, she would not give up, holding a strong belief...’

(Posted by ‘Chen Tong’, 12 March 2013)

As can be gathered from these examples, these two authors’ reflections on the roles of men and women, inspired by the world’s greatest novelists, quickly led to a question about stereotyped masculinity and femininity. There seems to be an underlying satire in Huang Tongtong’s tone, as if she could not accept that a man ‘married up’ simply because he was ‘young and handsome’. Among Chinese cultural values, a decent

husband is expected to earn more money and a higher social status. If men like Julien Sorel, Lucien Chardon, or Georges Duroy made use of marriage to live better lives, they would be dubbed ‘a gigolo’ (in Chinese, it translates as ‘little white face’; 小白脸). In the second excerpt, Chen Tong pointed to the discursive notion of perfect femininity, which suggests that women were still disciplined to behave like good docile Chinese women even in a post-socialist society. However, perhaps somewhat contradictorily, Chen Tong also agreed that women needed to have a sense of self-esteem, self-determination, and self-worth.

The tensions between Chinese culture and value and women’s sense of the self were particularly reflected in ‘style’ postings. The following excerpt, in which the author ‘vanilali’ compared ‘clothes’ with ‘men’, serves as a good example:

Title: Enjoyment of Gorgeous Attire – Falling Deeply in Love with Clothes

How could a woman feel lonely when faced with fine and beautiful clothes? She falls deeply in love with every one of her clothes: from ‘love at first sight’ in a salon or on a catwalk, to knowing each other in the period of measuring and tailoring. Sometimes, she and her clothes quarrelled: too loose or too tight, or she felt uncomfortable. After a while waiting, she finally would find the piece that fit her best: just like the Mr Right at the bottom of her heart.

(Posted by ‘vanilali’, 16 August 2013)

On the surface, the excerpt above exemplified the way in which some SBE bloggers used the narrative of fashion to express a strong sense of self-care. Yet, a closer look reveals that such discourses were tied to the traditional notion of femininity, where a woman’s enjoyment was predetermined by how to meet her ‘Mr Right’.

It is also important to recognise that none of the SBE bloggers tried to challenge traditional views on femininity within the topic genre of ‘personal journal’. Such findings thus hint that the practices of self-expression afforded by the Internet did not challenge the core of social norms or cultural values about Chinese women, since these changes acquire women’s resistance as ‘internalised oppression’ (see Chapter 2) on their own. The appearance of the Internet may contribute to women’s new practices, but cannot determine the internalised change of the self. For instance, as mentioned already (see Section 4.1.1), as early as in 1920s and 1930s, the advocacy for being a

modern Chinese woman began to burgeon, as the then women's magazines educated women how to get rid of the Confucian norms and encouraged them to become consumers of fashion and beauty. Yet, until now, the traditional femininity norms still work (see also Evans, 2008).

When it comes to the *Green-Red Group*, the participants agreed that weblogs had become an integral part of their lives, an activity through which they can reflect on who they are by narrating their own stories. In this respect, Lv Jing noted that 'I see my blog as a private garden in which I can freely cultivate any flowers and plants' (Personal Interview, 21 February 2011). Zhang Ping also described her blog as 'like a personal journal to document her life' (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012).

Furthermore, Green-Red Group authors gradually found that their weblogs were used more to reflect on the sense of self than to simply document feelings, thoughts, emotions, experiences, or life stories. As Lv Jing put it,

'Now I have realised that my blog can help me to think. If I want to write an article today, I need to search for related information online. This is a learning process, and also a process of re-defining myself. This is because written texts and oral words are different – it requires a careful transformation from oral words into written texts. Hence, this allows me to have a second thought about my previous ideas. I need to consider how I present my thorough ideas in beautiful texts. I can't show them in a random way. Although this is time-consuming, it lets me know who I am, what I am doing and what I really want from the bottom of my heart.'

(Lv Jing, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

Zhao Hong concurred with this perspective: 'After some time, I came to realise that my written posts had become a signal to show how I define my life, family, and work. I felt this was good.' (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012).

Yet, my interviews indicate that, like a majority of SBE bloggers, Green-Red Group authors were not engaged in questioning traditional norms of femininity; rather, their posts were based on cultural expectations attached to Chinese women. As one interviewee commented:

‘I think that marriage, family, and healthy psychology are still important for a woman. I don’t use the weblog to write something beyond morals, or to disobey the social requirements for a woman. My writing accords with traditional roles of femininity.’

(Zhao Hong, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

Even Green-Red Group participants were guided by normative values in the process of writing; they still integrated female perspectives into their posted articles and underlined the importance of their gendered identities. As Lv Jing remarked: ‘My writing is more from a female’s viewpoint and way of thinking. I try to express my thoughts as a *woman*’ (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012; emphasis added). This is also reflected in the ‘book review’ posts written by Zhao Hong and Wang Xiaoping, as many of their reviewed books touched on elements of women’s subjectivity.

In some cases, writing posts in a ‘personal journal’ style is used not simply to document the author’s experiences, internal states and reflections, but also to provide a ‘personal showcase’ (Kitzmann, 2004) of their competency in writing skills. As one interviewee noted:

‘For me, blogging or not blogging is flexible. By blogging, it actually means I have the desire to show, while not blogging is to keep a low profile. Writing a blog is not a difficult thing, because I am good at writing and because I have excellent writing skills. My feelings are that blogging is more about showcasing.’

(Zhao Hong, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

This was not the primary purpose for all examined blogs, but can be considered a result of the opportunities provided by weblogs to increase women’s chances of fulfilling their aspirations to show off their talents.

Yet, female bloggers were constantly alert to the protection of privacy when dealing with the public character of weblogs. For instance, Ai Xiaoyang said she never disclosed private information (e.g. home address) in her blog (Email Interview, 7 March 2012). Zhao Hong described the blog as ‘similar to a compelling place where you are being watched, so it’s not necessary to expose yourself to the public’ (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012).

Therefore, weblogs have opened up a new avenue for Chinese women to share their experiences and thoughts on many aspects of their lives, but they cannot change the traditional and patriarchal norms that have been internalised by Chinese women born and bred within the country. In other words, while the Internet may bring about changes to women's practices, it does not necessarily produce an internalised change of the self.

### **6.2.2 Agony Aunt: A Double-Edged Sword**

Of the 35 SBE blogs in which the topic of 'love, marriage, and sexual relationships' were addressed (see Table 6), more than half included posts written in a question-and-answer format, offering advice to readers who have encountered problems in their lives. This topic was titled 'agony aunt', with the following excerpt providing a good example:

#### **Title: Being Alert to Manipulative 'Schemes' in a Relationship**

Dear Xiaoyang,

I am a sensitive woman that always harbours feelings of insecurity. I have a boyfriend with whom I have been in a relationship for several years. Sometimes I feel he loves me very much, but sometimes I feel he does not care for me at all. Whenever I feel like he is not taking me seriously, I abuse myself: I stop eating and drinking, and even cut my hand. At first, he felt heartache when he saw me self-abusing, but as time went by, he became numb... Now our relationship is getting weaker and weaker; he even deliberately tries to avoid me. I am wondering how I can get his wholehearted love back without hurting myself.

(anonymous xxx)

Dear xxx,

In any case, a woman who uses uncontrolled "schemes" to maintain a relationship is not confident in herself. It may sound ridiculous to say, "I'm confident, I'm lovely, I'm independent" in the mirror ten times every day, but this could help you to establish self-confidence. In addition, I would suggest not reading too many plaintive, unrealistic

romantic novels, and to refrain from conversing with unconfident, biased friends about how “every man is a bastard”.

[...]

(Posted by ‘Ai Xiaoyang’, 3 January 2008)

The texts produced by agony aunts were typically structured in a ‘title-problem-solution’ format. Some bloggers dealt with one problem and one solution in a single post, while others listed several problems from different readers and provided corresponding solutions of various lengths in one post. It is very likely that those reading agony-aunt blogs were people who have faced real problems related to love, marriage and sexual relationships. To some extent, as a social agent in their own right, agony-aunt bloggers used their personal knowledge to raise their readers’ awareness of their own agency in their personal lives.

The appearance of agony aunts was likely coupled with a validation of their personal opinions, which then led to perceived feelings of ‘we-ness’ between the blogger and the reader. As one interviewee noted:

‘Offering advice on love and relationship is complex. Those people who write to me actually are not entirely unclear on what to do when they encounter problems. They just can’t overcome fear. What they need is a “listener” who sympathises with and understands them [...] My blog is just touching a chord with them and enabling them to express their emotions and pent-up feelings.’

(Ai Xiaoyang, Email Interview, 7 March 2012)

In other words, blogs make it easier for women who have a mastery of intimate matters to share knowledge and values with others. In addition, the influenced readers have the perception of psychological support.

At the same time, it is apparent that some agony aunts tended to use their blogs to articulate very real issues relating to sexuality or sex, such as sexual experiences, love affairs, loss of virginity, and one-night stands, but their responses normally reinforced traditional moral values. Below is an extract from one agony aunt’s blog entry in this respect:



**Reader's Question:**

Female, 24 years old. I was tricked into giving away my virginity to a man who is 19 years older than me. He is opening a company doing arts and crafts this October, and he asked me, along with my sister, to work in his company. He is quite a busy businessman, so we have had much less frequent contact in the last six months or so. He is a rich man, and he often goes to other cities for business. My question is, should I go and work in his company? Should I get along with him as a friend or should I end the relationship between us? I have no boyfriend and I am a female migrant worker. In the eyes of my family and friends, I am a good and qualified girl.

**Blogger's Answer:**

How could YOU say you are a qualified girl? Your story is just about having an affair with an old, married man! You even think of bringing your sister to work in his company... are you letting yourself and your sister become his slaves?

(Posted by Yu Shunshun, 10 July 2013)

Apparently, the reader sought help from Yu Shunshun to solve the dilemma she was facing about whether or not to end her relationship with the 'old businessman', because she was a victim who lost her virginity before marriage and did not want to accept the responsibility of the affair. Yet, it seemed that Yu Shunshun's reply would undermine the reader's confidence by stating that 'How could you say you are a qualified girl?'. Moreover, Yu Shunshun communicated a conservative discourse with the reader, since she indeed stressed that women needed to be sexually pure before marriage.

It is also important to recognise that the majority of agony aunts of this type preferred to give advice in a sarcastic or ironic tone, and even used negative terms and metaphors (e.g. pussy, old hag, blockhead, bitch, cougar, etc.) to mock their readers. All these point to their desire to 'catch more eyes'. As one interviewee put it:

"These bloggers disguise themselves as "expert analysts" to resolve problems around love, marriage and sexual relationships, but what they are actually doing is arousing public attention. [...] I think when it comes to analysing love or relationship problems, a *real* "expert analyst" should deal with them as normal practices in everyday life. In contrast,

such *so-called* “expert analysts” do not reply to their readers in a sincere way. What they do is only for curiosity, sensation and gossip.’

(Ai Xiaoyang, Email Interview, 7 March 2012; emphasis added)

One possible explanation for the existence of such eye-catching blogs is the nature of the commercially-oriented Sina Blog hosting platform, which is owned by Sina.com, one of the largest online media conglomerates in China today. This assumption is strengthened, as suggested by one interviewee, by the fact that agony aunts ‘do this for click rates [...] when one’s blog achieves high click rates, Sina put advertisements up on the blog, for which the blogger gets paid’ (Lv Jing, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012). Another interviewee agreed, stating that ‘they are professional, commercial writers’ (Zhao Hong, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012). I have also observed a few agony aunts of this type even charging when replying to readers’ specific questions and explicitly stating their fees. Although these ‘paying’ blogs were rare, there is a strong possibility that more existed, but that authors of such agony-aunt articles did not publicly mention the money they earn.

In this respect, it is worth quoting the remarks of the administrator of Online Feminism in China (FCN)<sup>11</sup>, who strongly expressed her hostile attitudes towards ‘professional writers’, although she did not have the time to blog:

‘The click rates they [professional writers] get are indeed men’s click rates. They look at women from the perspective of men; their ideas would not be what women really want to know, since they adopt a more patriarchal stance. This is a patriarchal society. This is also a consumerist society. They [professional writers] do so for money, not to speak for women, as they are not influenced by feminist beliefs, ideas and values. What they write is actually an alternative type of pornography...’

(Yu Tingting, Personal Interview, 3 March 2012)

This narration indicated that the ideas expressed by ‘professional writers’ were in fact from the perspective of men rather than women. It is also of interest to note here that this type of agony aunt has deliberately depicted their readers as victims and used their

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<sup>11</sup> FCN is one case of ‘online communities’ included in the sample of women’s groups (see Chapter 7).

experiences as a sales product to position them as passive objects of a male gaze. In this respect, there seemed to be an emergence of a patriarchal ideology of consumerism, which in turn cast an unfavourable light on women's development of self-empowerment.

Finally, some interviewees outside the SBE cohort questioned to what extent the 'agony aunt' advice sought and given could help women to respect their individual autonomy. As Zhao Hong, one member of the Green-Red Group, remarked:

'I feel that they [agony aunts] look like "soldiers" with capes, not guns. [...] In other words, they are "soldiers" riding a bicycle. Their weapons [i.e. capes and bikes] would not be effective. They should change their bicycles into vehicles.'

(Zhao Hong, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

As the quotation above shows, women's realisation of their selves does not lie in the advice given by 'agony aunt' bloggers, since discursive communication cannot play the role of a powerful 'weapon' that results in personal change. This once more points to the fact that weblogs offer opportunities for women to promote self-awareness, but they do not determine it.

Therefore, the emergence of the 'agony aunt' genre demonstrates that there is a clear distinction between practice and content. The weblogs were designed in a way that fulfilled some women's aspiration to position themselves as core actors to help other victimised women in 'love, marriage and sexual relationships'. Yet, the content of the advice they have given was indeed reactionary and conservative, which in turn disciplined women into behaving like good, docile Chinese women. This, I argue, is not empowering, but the illusion of empowerment. In addition, the presence of 'professional writers' who are driven by commercial factors is evidence that the commodification of weblogs perhaps constrains the development of self-empowerment among women. This is because such attention-grabbing posts are commonly treated as a commodity in order to attract the attention of men, which further reinforces the subordination of women in society.

### 6.2.3 Tutorial/Guide: Reflecting a Blogging Context Shaped by Conventional Norms

The tutorial/guide genre comprises posts derived from blogs that include content on ‘style’, ‘love, marriage, and sexual relationships’, and ‘parenting’. In this respect, the purpose of the communicative activity is to give specific instructions to the audience by writing in a persuasive or an advice-giving style. In other words, women can make use of the symbolic materials provided by blogs to present themselves as either ‘tutor’ or ‘guide’ to show their competence in their personal life. The tutorial/guide is the most common genre found so far in the SBE sample, and the following excerpt is a typical example:

**Title: How to Keep your Skin Moist this Autumn**

We previously talked about how to care for skin in late summer and early autumn time. Now let’s map out some detailed strategies with regards to keeping your skin moist.

Check your skin.

[...]

Put on toner first.

[...]

Put on toner again.

[...]

Don’t use oily skincare products.

[...]

Supplement with sun block cream.

[...]

(Posted by ‘T-cissy Jing’, 26 August 2013)

It is obvious that ‘T-cissy Jing’ was teaching readers how to apply skincare in order to take care of themselves and to show self-confidence, but underlying this discourse was



the message of beauty ideals. This is because normative femininity still remains as a strong presence in setting standards for the depiction of Chinese women, i.e. they need to be tender, soft, and beautiful, which in turn constitutes a very important aspect of a woman's life.

Sometimes, female authors also persuaded their readers to buy products that they had demonstrated in their blogs by displaying them more as a ‘representative’, as exemplified in the following excerpt:

**Title: Date Makeup Idea: A Must-Have Product**

We like wearing bright makeup when we hang out in the summer. How to do this? Today, ‘Strawberry’ [nickname of the blogger] would like to share her skincare tips with everyone!

**Part 1 Before the date**

<div> <div>part1 Before the date</div>  <div>picture of the product</div> <div>the blogger's explanation</div> <p>约会时自然少不了一个清香干净的秀发~女人天生爱美，在古代秀发是比女人生命重要的部分，甚至在生死离别时会赠送一梳秀发作为纪念。我也是个非常爱折腾的人，经常上发廊染啊，烫啊，因此失去了原有的秀发，我的头发越来越变得干枯，毛躁，而且非常容易断发，我也用了不少钱作发廊护发，折腾有所改善，但依旧没变。朋友介绍了一套<a href="#">Syoss保湿修护系列</a>，这款系列是专为亚洲发质所设计，能够解决发质问题，能够为发质密集补水，让头发水润一整天。</p> </div>	<div> <div>[Picture of the product] + [the blogger's explanation]</div> </div>
<div> <p>这款产品一共有4件，第一步当然是洗发护发，不得不提这一套下来非常划算，在家自己DIY沙龙体验，能够省下好多钱。<a href="#">Step one</a>去发廊随便折腾一次就没了，而且去发廊来回路程加上护理过程还非常花时间，性价比还是非常划算的，为了美丽和钱包，我当然要试一下，这款洗发露不仅可以滋润头发，头皮，还能够为头发补充水分。</p>  <div>photograph of the blogger trying the product</div> </div>	<div> <div>[Photograph of the blogger trying the product - step by step]</div> <div>[...]</div> </div>

(Posted by ‘Strawberry Xiaowanzi’, 18 July 2013)

It is clear that the excerpt above sheds light on everyday consumption, as ‘Strawberry Xiaowanzi’ listed the shampoo brand. Thus, while those female bloggers – like ‘Strawberry Xiaowanzi’ – have adopted the practice of giving advice on beauty, what they really do is to *not* help women develop female empowerment through the narrative of ‘this is self-care’. On the contrary, they used their blogs to trump the message of a consumerist version of self-care by gaining money through product placement. In this regard, we can see this type of bloggers as another example of commercialism.

Once more, the concerns about the traditional ideals of ‘love, marriage, and sexual relationships’ occurred in the topic genre of ‘tutorial/guide’. The following excerpt is a good example:

**Title: Five Don’ts of Getting Divorced**

I always hear women saying that they regret their divorce, but it is useless saying ‘sorry’.  
Please don’t get divorced when:

You can’t live independently...

Your friends are all against your divorce...

Your child is in a key developmental phase...

You are not in good health...

You think you have met your real ‘Mr. Right’ (not your husband) ...

(Posted by ‘youyou qy’, 20 August 2013)

Although ‘youyou qy’ is giving advice on ‘divorce’, her real intention was to persuade readers ‘not to divorce’, as a divorced woman in China would be seen as a ‘worthless’ female. Thus, in this case, a woman’s personal choice is disciplined by social norms. In China, marriage is still a major determinant of a woman’s public identity (see also Chapter 4): A woman in her late 20s with a decent job but no husband is not ‘perfect’; a divorced woman with a successful career is not ‘perfect’; a woman without either career or husband is a ‘loser’.

Therefore, weblogs have the potential to reframe women as ‘tutors’; however, there were some underlying tensions between self-transformation and the cultural stereotypes of gender (see also Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2004; Press, 2011). As the excerpts above show, ‘tutor/guide’ topics stressed pleasure and the freedom of choice of womanhood, but this autonomy was constrained by conventional norms, as the guidance or advice provided by these bloggers involved telling women how to develop the perfect picture of femininity.

#### 6.2.4 Criticism/View: Getting Involved in Public/Political Debate

Only ten female authors in the SBE sample, along with the two women activists and one pioneer women in the non-SBE sample, actually contributed to the criticism/view genre by blogging on the topic of ‘current events and news’. Typically, texts in this genre were organised in essay form (i.e. providing background, thesis statement, argument and summing up), and express the authors’ personal political viewpoints on gender issues with the intention of engaging in public debates. The next excerpt, derived from Li Yinhe - the *pioneer* in the field of gender and sexual studies in China - is a good example of this:

Title	Petitioning Representatives of the National People’s Congress to Propose Legislation on Homosexual Marriage
Background	According to the results of this year’s online polls, the proposal for homosexual marriage has been ranked as the 2 <sup>nd</sup> most important issue to be submitted to the National People’s Congress. However, the delegates of the Congress to whom I appealed refused to make this proposal [...]
Thesis Statement	I suggest legislating on homosexual marriage. The reasons are as follows:
Argument	Reason 1: there is no conflict between homosexuals and Chinese citizens according to current law [...]

Reason 2: as homosexuals belong to a minority group, a same-sex marriage law would be an indication of China's strong resolution to support human rights [...]

Reason 3: there will be a higher rate of HIV/AIDS if no law exists to protect gay and lesbian people

Reason 4: the acceptance of homosexual marriage would aid China's population-control efforts [...]

Reason 5: homosexual marriage would decrease many real-life tragedies (e.g. wives of gay men) [...]

Reason 6: homosexual marriage would be useful in the establishment of a positive image of China in the world

Summing up

All in all [...]

(Posted by Li Yinhe, 3 March 2012)

Meanwhile, Li Yinhe's blog posts were associated mainly with her radical views on gay rights, sadomasochism, sexual practices, love, relationships and so on, thereby challenging the core views of sexual morality, norms, and values held by Chinese people. For instance, the following titles were excerpted from her most popular posts, based on viewing clicks and number of comments:

Forwarding Open Letters from Mothers of Ten Homosexuals

(Posted on 9 May 2012)

Petitioning Representatives of the National People's Congress to Propose Legislation on Homosexual Marriage

(Posted on 3 May 2012)

Homosexuality in China: Rising Early, but Staying up Late

(Posted on 1 July 2010)



Defending Ma Xiaohai and his Engagement in Group Licentiousness

(Posted on 12 April 2010)

Does Cancelling Group Licentiousness Violate Social Morals?

(Posted on 7 April 2010)

Petitioning for the Cancellation of Group Licentiousness

(Posted on 3 Mar 2010)

Paying Attention to the Wives of Gay Men

(Posted on 6 May 2009)

In this respect, as the interviews showed, female authors on the ‘criticism/view’ topic had a desire to incorporate feminist voices into the political discourse. As the activist blogger Ke Qianting questioned:

‘I often wonder why so few women write blogs on current political, social, or cultural events. Why are ‘politics’ blogs dominated by men? Why is it more acceptable that men can blog on current issues? I think I can do so as well.’

(Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012).

Thus, it is no surprise that ‘gender politics’ was the predominant theme in the blogs owned by the **woman activist** Ke Qianting. She expressed her strong views on current news and events related to women, while also providing critical commentary on negative stereotypes of women. The following excerpt, from a blog post entitled ‘Everyone is a *Green Tea Bitch*<sup>12</sup>, serves as a good example:

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<sup>12</sup> Green Tea Bitch is a new Chinese term launched over the Internet between March and April 2013. Here is the online definition of Green Tea Bitch: ‘[...] it particularly refers to sluts who pretend to be very innocent, with beautiful long hair and a clean face. It seems as if she is not wearing any make-up but she secretly does. It appears as if she is harmless and has been hurt herself, like she has experienced so much pain. Actually she is a woman who is more ambitious than any other’ (<http://www.whatsonweibo.com/dangerous-women-the-green-tea-bitch/>). A more detailed description and background about the Green Tea Bitch can also be found in this online article entitled ‘The “Green Tea Bitch” - Stereotyping Chinese Women’.

This morning, when I was back in the office, the first thing I did was to respond to queries from young female activists who intended to protest against the recent widespread use of new terms to discriminate sexually against women.

When I read the online discussion about these “biased words”: xxx bitch, xxx bitch... a dozen “bitch” collocations with different adjectives, I felt SHOCK. I felt like I was in a tight-knit web, every node in the web represented a “bitch” word...

I am angry, but also curious: why can't women start gossiping about men? [...]

As a woman, I can't feel free as long as people, especially men, categorise “women” into different classes according to body, sex and social norms. A woman, even if she is a queen, can't escape from a culturally contaminated environment filled with biased and offensive words against her.

So, I want to say, the women classified as “xxx bitch” don't break any social norms. “Xxx bitch” indeed is a symbol of moral slander, and its only function is to intimidate, to prevent those victimised women speaking the truth.

Everyone is a Green Tea Bitch; I am a Green Tea Bitch. When women can laugh wildly at these three words, they are possessed with liberation, freedom and empowerment!

(Posted on 8 April 2013)

Similarly, ‘gender politics’ was also the main theme of Xie Lihua's blog, but she expressed her views on gender somewhat differently, and often brought up the issue explicitly when commenting on her experiences at work. The following excerpt, from an entry entitled ‘A Forum Related to Women's Empowerment in Rural Areas’, is a typical example:

Yesterday I attended the forum of “Women's Role in Rural Development” organised by the All-China Women Federation and UN Women. As one of the keynote speakers and the only one from a women's NGO, I presented my views on how to empower rural women as follows: [...]

(Posted on 22 May 2012)

In the interview, Xie Lihua also felt that, as a woman, it was necessary for her to ‘say something and try to have a voice in public space’ (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

At this point, it is worth quoting the words of Lv Pin, who was both the co-organisier of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder of Gender Watch Women’s Voice (GWWV)<sup>13</sup>, as she used to have an MSN space to express feminist ideas and to criticise political events from a feminist lens:

‘Why can women not care for society? Why can women only write their everyday life in a blog? It is true that the value of weblogs lies in personal expression, but I think it is more important to take part in public events and public debate. Women have the freedom to express their opinion in public life, not only constrained to “what breakfast did I have today”.’

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012).

Yet, Lv Pin’s MSN space was blocked in 2005 because some of her uploaded material touched on politically-sensitive content, which in turn indicates that censorship curtails the development of women’s self-empowerment.

In this regard, it is no surprise that women’s political opinions overall tend to be expressed in a milder way (apart from *the pioneer* Li Yinhe); that is, they often use soft tones to criticise political and social issues. This is especially pronounced for *the* SBE blogger Ai Xiaoyang who describes herself as a ‘medium-degree feminist’. For example, in one of her postings entitled ‘New Marriage Law Forced Married Women to be Shrews’, she wrote:

I have no intention of being a feminist, but I doubt that currently so-called gender equality has become a sharp weapon to deprive women of freedom and rights. When a group of middle-aged men, as decision-makers, regulated such a simple, brutal law to take rights away from those women who have been committed to their family, husbands, and children for several decades, how can we count on our children to respect their mothers, to respect women? Is gender-equality going to dig out the root of ‘respecting women’? Some people say women have been too powerful in married life, but this is not the fault of women. The law does not protect women, so is there any better solution for

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<sup>13</sup> Both GAD and GWWV are two cases of ‘civic associations’ in my sampled women’s groups (see Chapter 6).

women forced to be a 'shrew' to gain more benefits that have not been regulated by the law yet?

(Posted by Ai Xiaoyang, 25 August 2011)

This excerpt addresses the author's anger at the enforcement of China's New Marriage Law – which indeed undermined women's interests, but takes the stance that 'I have no intention of being a feminist'.

This also suggests that women deliberately choose a conservative method when participating in public debates; Ai Xiaoyang explained why she uses the term 'medium-degree feminist':

'Thus, for most women who want to survive in life without being subordinate to men, becoming a medium-degree feminist is fair enough. I mean, "absolute" feminism is a revolution that needs "blood". I don't ask women to achieve their rights at the risk of "blood". I hope women find a wise way to realise their identity in a patriarchal society. I hope women become skilled in dealing with the male-female relationship, instead of becoming warriors in the battle against chauvinism.'

(Ai Xiaoyang, Email Interview, 7 March 2012)

Underlying this message is the fact that blogging practice is framed and shaped by the Chinese context which proclaims feminism is 'a politics of opposition' (Schaffer & Song, 2007, p.20). This trend also becomes rather evident in the SBE cohort: very few female bloggers in this regard expressed political or feminist views on gender. The reason for this absence was continuously explained by Ai Xiaoyang:

'Feminism is a kind of avant-garde activity in China, and is meaningful only for a few women. In other words, feminism is only a concept for most Chinese women. In China, if I advocate feminism and maintain a high profile, I would be criticised, attacked, or even hurt ...'

(Ai Xiaoyang, Email Interview, 7 March 2012)

In other words, while in theory the full potential behind the feminist idea that 'the personal is the political' can be realised through blogging activities (Gregg, 2006), the articulation of women's concerns occurring through weblogs is entwined with China's

cultural, social and political environments. In China, a feminist – the term being imported from the Western world – is treated as a term containing radical and extreme elements, and has become a metaphor for a disliked and despised woman. In addition, China's Communist Party (CCP) has a long history of proclaiming that Western feminism is capitalist and anti-socialist (see Chapter 4). In this regard, it is a term that does not suit the Chinese context, and it is thus no surprise that Chinese women in general shy away from the concept of feminism.

Thus, Ai Xiaoyang's 'medium-degree' of political expression can further be interpreted as a strategy for the prevention of China's censorship. Evidence from the interviews also suggests that the 'criticism/view' bloggers always keep self-censorship in mind. As one interviewee noted, 'I think I know where the bottom line [of censorship] is [...] so I don't mention those "extreme" words' (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). This means 'using other "softer" words to speak your mind' (Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012). This might also explain why the blogs authored by Xie Lihua and Ke Qianting, unlike the above mentioned Lv Pin, were not blocked.

Therefore, criticism/view bloggers, although not occupying a strong position in my sample, send out a signal that they are disseminating information about feminist issues to the public, as the content about which they write actually questions traditional norms and values related to women. In the meantime, they need to keep in mind the potential threat of online censorship.

### **6.2.5 Arts Portfolio: Building a Creative Sense of Self**

Only four *SBE blog authors* posted material that can be viewed as examples of the 'arts showcase' genre, providing a collection of photographs, drawings, designs or calligraphy for their audiences (see Figure 6.3). In addition, two other women from *the Green-Red Group* extolled literary aspirations in their blogs, which are more likely to take the form of prose poetry, or novels, revealing their state of mind. As Zhang Ping explained, 'I write poems in my free time to document my life. The appearance of blogs inspired and encouraged me to write more poems' (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012). In this regard, the emergence of the 'arts portfolio' genre suggests that weblogs can help women build their creative agency.

**Figure 6.3 Example of the topic genre of 'arts portfolio' (emoticons designed by the blogger)**



### 6.3 Selective Features of Weblogs that Allow for Identity Projection

Aside from providing a platform for self-expression, weblogs have increasingly become established spaces for self-presentation, due to their easy-to-use, flexible design features which include performative characteristics (e.g. templates, fonts, colours, images, animations, etc.).

Table 6.3 presents the ways in which female authors in both the SBE and non-SBE samples manipulated blog features to project their identity. As shown in the table, 63.6 per cent of blogs in the SBE sample contain only their authors' pseudonyms, while only 19.3 per cent reveal their real name. For these female bloggers, the use of a pseudonym is aimed at emphasising their unique character and expressing their creativity, while their real name is there merely to verify personal identity, as well as to indicate that their accounts are not fake.

Surprisingly, another 17.0 per cent of SBE bloggers provided both a pseudonym and their real name. One possible explanation for this phenomenon seemed to stem from the habitual use of pseudonyms and their prevalent use on the authors' other social networking platforms. In this respect, a pseudonym might not function to conceal information. As one interviewee, Ai Xiaoyang, explained, 'I created my pseudonym when I worked as a magazine columnist several years ago.

**Table 6.3 Blog features for self-display**

(N=88; % of total)	SBE Blogs		Non-SBE Blogs
	F	Per Cent	
Profile Name			
Pseudonym	56	63.6	Green-Red Group (n=4)
Real name	17	19.3	Women Activists (n=2) Pioneer (n=1)
Both	15	17.0	-
Blog Title			
Random words	47	53.4	Women Activists: Ke Green-Red Group: Lv, Zhang
Work affiliation	12	13.6	-
No description	29	33.0	Women Activists: Xie Pioneer: Li Green-Red Group: Zhao, Wang
Profile Picture			
Real photo	58	65.9	Women Activists (n=2) Pioneer (n=1) Green-Red Group: Wang
Miscellaneous picture	30	34.1	Green-Red Group: Lv, Zhao, Zhang
Self-Description			
Mini-CV	41	46.6	Women Activists: Ke
Narrative	33	37.5	Green-Red Group: Lv
Professionalism			
The author’s publications	62	70.5	Green-Red Group: Wang
Posts recommended by editors	46	52.3	Green-Red Group: Lv
Hyperlinked news articles about the author	4	4.5	Women Activists: Ke

My magazine readers already know that “Ai Xiaoyang” is me, and most of them are my current blog readers’ (Email Interview, 7 March 2012). In this way, the pseudonym can be considered a ‘conventional signal’ for a reliable self-portrayal (see Donath & boyd, 2004), and as a result, these bloggers did not fear disclosing their real names.

In terms of the non-SBE blogs, both women activists and the pioneer were quite forward in providing their real names, which can be considered a result of the ‘criticism/view’ genre to which their blog posts belong (see the previous section), whereby authors need to show clearly who they are in order to state their opinions regarding gender politics. By contrast, all four women in the Green-Red Group used pseudonyms in their blogs, not only to protect themselves, but also to hint at their personalities. It is of interest to note here that the original intention of Zhao Hong’s pseudonym – ‘*A Beauty from Heaven*’ – was used to construct a good-looking female image and to perform her femininity in an explicit way. In the words of Zhao Hong:

‘This pseudonym can be traced back to 1999-2000, when I first started using online chat rooms. It was used to attract more men to have a chat with me, as we didn’t know each other, but I felt like it was a beautiful name [...] Then afterwards I used this name in each of my online accounts. I thought this name was not bad... it opened a window into men’s imagination.’

(Zhao Hong, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

In this respect, Zhao Hong’s identity projection could be understood in the light of a heterosexual social context in which she consciously created certain gender performances to grab men’s attention.

Blogs also allow authors to define their online presence through carefully-created blog titles. As seen in the table above, more than half of SBE blog owners (53.4 per cent) created the title of their blogs via random words. In addition, 13.6 per cent in the SBE sample included a work affiliation in their blog title. For non-SBE blog participants, only one activist blogger (Ke Qianting) and two members of the Green-Red Group (Lv Jing and Zhang Ping) drew upon a strategy of self-creation to frame the character of their blogs. In particular, in my interviews with Lv Jing and Zhang Ping, both of them considered their blog titles a careful choice to present an authentic sense of the self. In



this respect, when asked why her blog title was ‘*We shall meet again in the mundane world*’, Lv Jing commented:

‘Because I think we modern people are living in a fickle, noisy world. In such a world, how could we find the **true** sense of ourselves? “Meeting again” not only means we meet again with friends, family; more importantly, it means we meet again with **us**. [...] We have to know: Who are we? What are we doing? We have to know the deepest side of our hearts.’

(Lv Jing, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012; emphasis added)

Zhang Ping expressed a similar opinion when she explained why she named her blog ‘*Observing the water*’:

‘My blog title is *Guanshui* (Chinese; means observing the water), because I am always interested in water. In Chinese traditional culture, water is not only the fluid we can see in everyday life, but also, from the perspective of cultural implications, contains deeper, philosophical elements. Our ancestors gave water the metaphorical meaning to describe something that is profound and persistent. In addition, we can sense that time elapses through water. I also think that when I am watching, observing the water, I will not lose my thoughts.’

(Zhang Ping, Personal Interview, 21 February 2012)

As gathered from the excerpts above, these two female authors performed a self through a conscious creation of their blog titles, which – at the same time – is bound up with their personal knowledge about the world. More importantly, in this case, the creation of blog titles illustrated the ways that women, like men, also had the need to learn and to think. In addition, they have their own way of understanding the world and possess the capability to express their own self-worth.

Moreover, the uploading of images plays a part in conveying who the blog authors are in the absence of their real bodies. In the SBE sample, 65.9 per cent of blogs contain a photograph of the author, while the remaining 34.1 per cent use a miscellaneous picture. For non-SBE bloggers, its constituents, aside from three members of the Green-Red Group (Lv Jing, Zhao Hong and Zhang Ping) who provided a miscellaneous picture, used real photos of themselves.

Furthermore, the SBE blogging platform offers a self-description component that gives female authors the opportunity to present more information about themselves. On the blogs analysed in the SBE sample, the methods used to describe the self included a mini-CV (46.6 per cent) and a narrative (37.5 per cent), while 15.9 per cent withheld such information. A mini-CV is a short summary of the author's career history that includes any particularly-impressive achievements (e.g. publications), while the narrative is a vivid description highlighting 'this is my name, this is where I live, this is what I do' (Walker, 2000, p.102). In the non-SBE blogs, Ke Qianting (a female activist) exemplified the mini-CV, while Lv Jing (of the Green-Red Group) leans more towards providing the narrative style. Typical examples of a mini-CV and narrative are presented in Figure 6.4. In this respect, we should keep in mind that it is women's individual choice whether to present their identity in a specific way, although weblogs have afforded them a great opportunity to do whatever they like.

Finally, blogs offer features that female authors can employ to portray their professionalism, with three self-promoting strategies emerging from the analysis of the 88 SBE blogs. These are 'the author's publications' (70.5 per cent), 'posts recommended by editors' (52.3 per cent), and 'hyperlinked news articles about the author' (4.5 per cent). For the non-SBE blogs, only Wang Xiaoping (Green-Red Group) uses her blog to advertise her book, while Lv Jing (Green-Red Group) has posts recommended by editors, and the activist blogger Ke Qianting documents her organised activities advocating for gender rights in the form of hyperlinked news articles. Hence, for many of my sampled female bloggers, their weblogs offer them an opportunity to present themselves as competent and to show their capability to think thoroughly and to write good-quality articles.

The results above show that weblogs provide women with a more convenient and customised space from which to project their identity. Within this medium, they can choose from a variety of symbolic resources afforded by weblogs to produce a display of self, and to present a professional image according to their subjective needs.

**Figure 6.4 Examples of a mini-CV and narrative for self-description**

(1) Example of a mini-CV (from the blog of ‘Ayawawa’)	
<p><b>她在做什么</b></p> <p>择优接受广告拍摄。</p> <p>择优接受媒体邀稿。</p> <p>择优接受主持活动。</p> <p>作为国际天才组织(mensa)大陆地区联络人，为建立中国门萨分会而积极呼吁中。</p> <p>一直致力于两性情感研究。著有剖析两性情感的散文集《恋爱厚黑学》问答集《我和幸福有个误会》专著《别拿男人不当动物》问答集《女人想结婚，男人想私奔》</p>	<p><b>What does she do?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Advertisement model</li> <li>- Invited author on specific media channels</li> <li>- Part-time TV presenter</li> <li>- Moderator of the online community ‘Mensa International’, Mainland [...]</li> <li>- Devoted to research on love and relationships. Publications include: [...]</li> </ul>
(2) Example of a narrative (from the blog of ‘Ai Xiaoyang’)	
<p><b>关于我</b></p> <p>爱的不是羊，是人。 沉迷的不是生活，是旁观。</p> <p>艾小羊，自由撰稿人。现居武汉。</p> <p>毕业于武汉大学考古学专业。曾混迹于酒店、国企、广告公司、报刊杂志等多个行业。 准宅女，中等女权主义者。不吸烟不喝酒作息制度健康。杂文老辣，小说纯情，外表练达，内里天真。</p>	<p><b>About me</b></p> <p>What I love are not ‘sheep’; instead they are ‘people’.</p> <p>What I like is not ‘life’; instead it is ‘observation’.</p> <p>Ai Xiaoyang, a freelancer, living in Wuhan.</p> <p>Graduated from Wuhan University, majoring in Archaeology. Worked in hotels, state-owned corporations, advertisement agencies, newspapers and magazines.</p> <p>A geek-girl-to-be, a medium-degree feminist. No smoking, no drinking, living with a healthy daily schedule. Writing sharp essays and purely romantic novels. Life is hard, but with a tender heart.</p>

## 6.4 Managing Connections of the Self for Personal Social Networks

As ‘a network of networks’, the power of the Internet can also deceive in the way it opens up new avenues for women to build, develop and maintain individually-oriented social relationships. These individualised social networks created by the female bloggers sampled can be listed under two categories: the ‘audience circle’ and the ‘peer circle’.

### 6.4.1 Audience Circle: A Stratification of Personal Connections

As shown in Table 6.4, not all SBE bloggers enable the ‘comments to blog posts’ function of their blogs (81.8 per cent), although comments play a crucial role in helping bloggers to communicate with their readers. In addition, the number of bloggers in the SBE cohort who selected the option to allow ‘leaving a message on the main page’ is fewer still (45.4 per cent). Very few of the sampled bloggers reply to their readers’ comments. As Ai Xiaoyang remarked: ‘I don’t frequently reply to readers’ comments. I don’t have the time to do so’ (Email Interview, 7 March 2012).

**Table 6.4** *Communicative practices with the audience*

<i>(N=88; % of total)</i>	SBE Blogs		Non-SBE Blogs
	<i>F</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>	
Comments on blog posts	72	81.8	<b>Women Activists</b> (n=2) <b>Pioneer</b> (n=1) <b>Green-Red Group</b> (n=4)
Leaving a message on the main page	40	45.4	<b>Women Activists: Xie</b>
Subscription option	31	35.2	-
Joining a discussion group (via QQ)	28	31.8	-
Links to personal websites	24	27.3	-
Links to other social networking sites	15	17.0	-
E-mail	13	14.8	<b>Women Activists: Ke</b>
<b>Default: Weibo[*]</b>			

The content analysis carried out in this study found that readers tended to express support for, or share personal ideas with, the blogger. As Table 6.5 shows, of the 479 comments selected from 10 of the more popular SBE bloggers, 34.0 per cent included content of the former kind. The following comments are typical examples:

I really like you. Hope you all the best!

(Posted on 'Wang Maomao's blog by 'linca', 12 April 2013)

What pertinent remarks you have posted! I have learned a lot from you...

(Posted on 'Ayawawa's blog by 'CandyMiaoer', 16 June 2013)

Love you!

(Posted on 'Yi Shu's blog by 'Prayer', 18 April 2013)

In addition, another 31.5 per cent of the commentators shared their personal ideas based on the bloggers' content. Only a total of 36 comments could be defined as 'trolling'. In some cases, this includes swearing to express anger, frustration, or disapproval with the bloggers without addressing any specific reasons for this, while others used pornographic or bitter satire to criticise the blogger. Take for instance the following comments:

I fuck you and your mother!

(Posted on 'Summer Ziluolan's blog by 'Shanruo1121', 12 June 2013)

The analysis also revealed that several readers use the blogger's commentary field as a space in which to write protest messages against the government, although this was very rare. Moreover, a total of 62 'spam' messages were identified in all examined comments, taking the form of commercial advertisements.

In this respect, when asked about her reaction to the provoked comments, Ai Xiaoyang talked about her changing attitudes over time:

'Initially, I cared very much about different opinions, and was very angry and frustrated about those ones who used offensive language. But now, I can simply ignore them, and even don't delete the messages that insult me. [...] This is because some people just like

to abuse others and to rebuke, without any reasons. Since I have chosen to publicly express my views of point through the weblog, I need to prepare myself to be the target of attacks.'

(Ai Xiaoyang, Email Interview, 7 March 2012)

Such changes are also reflected in Ai Xiaoyang's blog. For instance, in an earlier post entitled 'Before Marriage and After Marriage', Ai Xiaoyang discussed many problems that might happen in married life, including conflict between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, or a love affair. This post drew 64 replies, among which there was one reader, 'cywr001', attacked Ai Xiaoyang with offensive language, saying: 'Xiaoyang, you can go SHI [meaning go and die in Chinese]!'. Then Ai Xiaoyang used irony to fight back: 'It seems you are more interested in SHI [here, it means bullshit in Chinese] than me, I think you'd better go [both go and die, and bullshit] first!'. Yet, based on my observation of Ai Xiaoyang's weblog, it was rather difficult to find that she fought against readers who posted abusive comments after June 2012.

***Table 6.5 Types of comments posted on the ten most popular SBE blogs***

<b><i>(N=479)</i></b>	<b><i>F</i></b>	<b><i>Per Cent</i></b>
Expressing support	163	34.0
Sharing personal ideas	151	31.5
Spam messages	62	12.9
'Trolling'	36	8.0

All non-SBE bloggers allow 'comments on blog posts', while only one activist – Xie Lihua – suggests that readers 'leave a message on the main page'. On the blogs of both activist women and the pioneer, of a total of 132 analysed comments, 51 reflected that the reader shared the blogger's opinions, 30 expressed readers' support and appreciation, and 34 included criticism or even 'flaming'. Ke Qianting's blog in particular attracted negative comments, as her posts talk explicitly about 'sexuality education' – a controversial topic in the eyes of many Chinese people. As she put it:

'I am disappointed in the commentators. In general, more than 60 per cent of them promote pornographic advertisements, and others talk crap. Readers who share "useful" opinions account for less than 20 per cent'.

(Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012)

This slightly higher number of 'trolling' messages may reflect a bias towards women, as the term 'women' is more likely to relate to 'sex' in Chinese cyberspace (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). This is because when 'women' is understood to mean 'female' (*nv xing*; 女性; see also Chapter 4), the Chinese pronunciation sounds like 'sex' (*xing*; 性). Ke agreed with this, stating that 'the Chinese public in general do not have a proper understanding about gender, and it is their "habit" to link gender with sex in a negative way' (Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012).

In the case of the Green-Red Group, their interviews revealed that their relationships with their readers is much stronger than is the case with the SBE cohort, in that most of the commentators are personal friends and acquaintances. The interviews further revealed that these four women rarely encounter 'trolling', which may be related to the personal nature of their posts documenting life experiences, events and random thoughts which do not provoke a strong reaction among their readers. The content analysis carried out found that, of the 120 comments posted on the first page of these four blogs, the majority express support and encouragement by the reader (61.6 per cent), an exchange of opinions (25.8 per cent) or a display of appreciation (10.8 per cent).

Finally, some of the authors in the SBE sample provided more opportunities to give feedback, ensuring that their relationship with their readers is maintained. This included options for 'subscription' (35.2 per cent), 'joining a discussion group' (31.8 per cent), 'links to personal websites' (27.3 per cent), 'links to other social network sites' (17.0 per cent), and to 'email' (14.8 per cent). Only Ke Qianting, an activist blogger in the non-SBE sample, provides her email address, simply because she is often asked for permission to re-publish her posts on other digital platforms (Personal Interview, 11 April 2012). It should be noted that the opportunity to 'join a discussion group' and 'link to other social network sites' reveals that weblogs are not the primary space in which the sampled female authors sought to create a solid bond with their

readers. This can be attributed to the fact that discussion groups and social networking sites are more private than blogs, as readers need to send requests to the blogger with a clear statement of their reason for joining, and then wait for the blogger's approval.

#### **6.4.2 Peer Circle: Common Ground, Trust, and Offline Relationships**

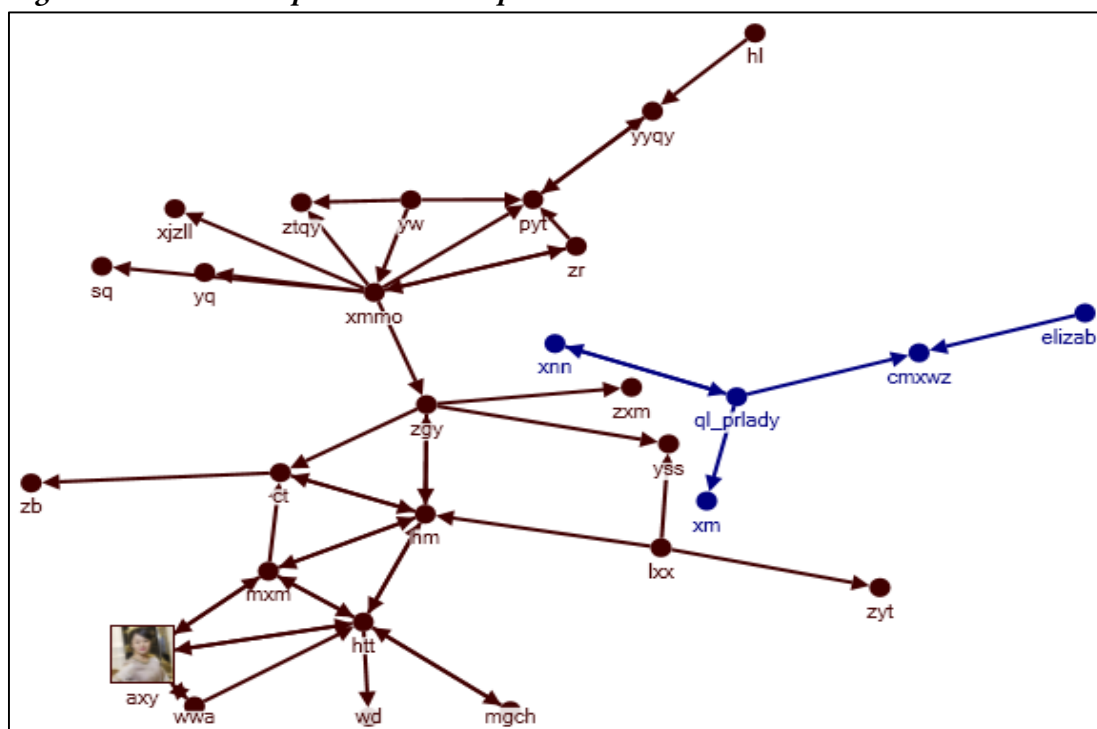
In addition to the 'audience circle', social network analysis further illustrated that weblogs provided the opportunity for women to build 'peer circles' with other bloggers based on common interests. Following this logic, by examining every connection between the 88 SBE blogs through the NodeXL software (see Methodology Chapter), Figure 6.5 illustrates the results of this network analysis.

As shown in the figure, there are two separate spheres, each defined by their concentration on specific topics. The spheres in dark brown represent the topical cluster of 'love, marriage and sexual relationships', and the spheres in blue are about another topical cluster, 'style'. In this respect, it is worth noting that not every SBE member is connected to each other, and established connections are rarely reciprocal. Thus, it is no surprise that the online network is sparsely structured. One explanation for this may be the lower levels of trust between people, especially between strangers, caused by the performance of identity on a blogging platform. As noted by one interviewee, Ai Xiaoyang (pictured in Figure 6.5): 'It is not usual for me to connect to strangers. My hyperlinked friends are close friends and work colleagues' (Email Interview, 7 March 2012).

The absence of a certain degree of trust among these SBE bloggers is perhaps the result of their values and interests which seem to be oriented more towards self-promotion and sometimes commercial gain (see section 6.2 and 6.3). At the same time, online censorship can be, once again, regarded as another factor that weakens their commitment to building trust. In a broader sense, the conservative character of the SBE – as its launch is officially approved (see section 5.3.1.1) – could further explain why two separate topical clusters (i.e. 'love, marriage, and sexual relationship'; and 'style') have emerged from my social network analysis, as no common 'friend' exists between these two spheres. Thus, within such an online environment, it is no surprise that the level of trust between strangers would be rather low.



**Figure 6.5 Network map of the SBE sample**



In contrast, the interviews conducted with the four authors of the Green-Red Group revealed that weblogs can be used to strengthen offline connections, especially vague acquaintances or weak ties. As explained by Zhang Ping:

‘Initially, the four of us had little face-to-face contact; but through accidental opportunity, and because of our blogs, we now have a deeper understanding of each other. The blogs afford texts, and the texts affect the soul – which bonds us. It is a fact that we have different lifestyles and occupations, and different interests and experiences, but we are soul mates. From this point of view, we have a lot in common. Our hearts are becoming closer and closer through our textual communication, through our blogging activities, which further deepens our communication in real life.’

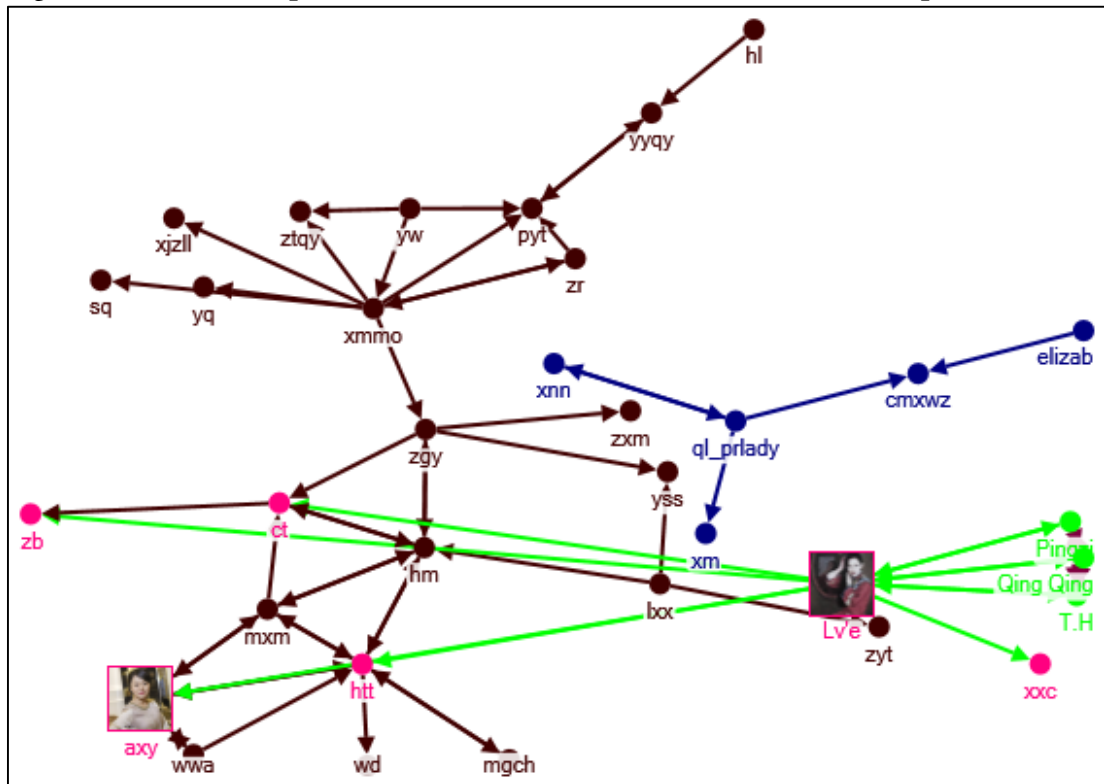
(Zhang Ping, Personal Interview, 21 February, 2012)

There seems to be an underlying optimism in Zhang Ping’s narration, as if weblogs are capable of developing personal relations by diffusing the boundaries between the online and offline world without any potential threat to privacy and safety.

In contrast to the SBE bloggers, social network analysis of the Green-Red Group suggests that they use blogs to enlarge their personal networks. This is especially pronounced in the case of Lv Jing (pictured in Figure 6.6), who connects with five SBE

bloggers (represented as pink nodes in Figure 6.6) with whom she does not maintain a close relationship in real life. In her interview, she said, ‘the Internet is so amazing, as it can infinitely expand my social circles. Old and new friends can all be together!’ (Personal Interview, 21 February 2012). This also indicates that Lv Jing can not only integrate the Green-Red Group into the larger SBE network, but can also enlarge the SBE network by introducing new members.

**Figure 6.6 Network map formed between the SBE and the Green-Red Group**



These overall results suggest that the potential for connectivity afforded by the Internet exists, as some of the sampled women have used it to look to form an online social circle. For the Green-Red Group, weblogs played an important role in expanding their social networks, because they realised the connectivity affordances of the Internet to build, develop and strengthen their relationships with each other. In this regard, the Green-Red Group could be viewed as a good example illustrating the power of the Internet to generate new patterns of affiliation between individuals. However, it is worth bearing in mind that members of the Green-Red Group were old acquaintances with weak ties before their use of weblogs – they were not ‘strangers’ to each other. For the remaining female authors, the hyperlinks have not been used as a

means of expanding personal social networks, although they have the potential to encourage the bloggers to do so. In this respect, the main reason might lie in a lack of trust among strangers online due to the noise, jokes, and satires filled with the Chinese Internet (see Chapter 4). At the same time, the fact remains that the individual is still situated in the centre in terms of managing online networks, from where they can choose with whom to connect and who to ignore. This reflects an enhanced sense of individual subjectivity among women, although it does not necessarily mean that women can definitely create new patterns of sociality as a result of their Internet use.

## **Chapter 7 Women's Groups and Women's Empowerment in China**

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As shown in the theoretical framework discussions, the Internet can bring about important potential impacts on women's groups in how they organise, using their own initiative with the purposes of challenging and changing a male-dominated system. Thus, from the vantage point of women's groups, this chapter discusses the main findings concerning the role of the Internet in the processes of women's empowerment in China. It also aims to address the second research question of this study:

**RQ2:** How do women's groups use websites to empower women in China?

- What is the role of websites in the process of informing, building a sense of the collective, as well as campaigning, and networking with peer organisations?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of websites in this process?

### **7.1 Getting to Know the Organisational Actors: Women's Groups**

Before moving to the analysis of how women's groups came to constitute themselves as important actors for women's empowerment, and the role of the Internet in this process, some remarks on who they are and what they are doing are necessary. This description draws its empirical material from in-depth interviews with 22 staff members from selected groups in the sample, as well as additional documents obtained from fieldwork. I also opted to focus on the section of 'about us' on the official websites of sampled women's groups to find out more information, such as about their history, mission, achievements, and personnel. All of these materials provided an entry point to understanding the nature of women's groups in the present study and their relationship with women's empowerment.

I selected a total number of 17 women's groups who had the aim of promoting gender equality or changing the status quo of women in Chinese society, but who differed in goal orientation, organisational resources, and campaign tactics. This sample includes both pre-existing 'physical' organisations within the real world and 'virtual' communities that have formed themselves in cyberspace. These women's groups established their websites between 2000 and 2006. In addition, they were

selected in light of four organisational types based on their relationship to the government and their organisational structure; that is, two government agencies, nine civic associations, three university-based centres, and three online communities were included. These organisational types, I argue, serve as a way to shape group actors' political purposes and priorities in relation to a broad range of Chinese women's issues.

### **7.1.1 Government Agencies**

Government agencies refer to women's groups that have been set up by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and operated within the institutional system. In this case, it includes the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) and the Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC), both located in Beijing.

Founded in 1949, the ACWF is the largest officially-recognised organisation representing women's interests across all ethnic groups in China. It plays the role of Chinese women's *representative* in order to contribute to the national development and to participate in political decision-making. On the other hand, it acts as a mouthpiece for the CCP to promote development for all Chinese women and to protect the rights of all Chinese women. In other words, the ACWF is a stronghold of the CCP, speaking and working for the government in order to bond with Chinese women (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

Another striking feature of the ACWF is its well-established, large-scale organisational structure. Apart from its hierarchal internal structure, the ACWF has a network that runs from the highest national level down to 31 provincial-level branches, then down to numerous branches at municipal, county and village level in China. In addition, it sponsors and supervises 14 second-tier associations, as well as 17 group members that all are national women's organisations registered with the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

It thus displays the characteristics of a formal organisation that has an authority structure, rich political resources, and a large number of staff across China. In addition, it receives sufficient financial resources from the CCP (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). Perhaps the most important role of the ACWF is to propose national policies to raise women's status and to ensure gender equality in China (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). The ACWF also offers

training programmes to female cadres from different branches, conducts fieldwork research to address women's problems, and provides educational opportunities to girls from poor families and rural places. All of these tactics are used to eliminate barriers to women's empowerment in China.

The Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC), as another 'government agency', is a second-tier association under the supervision of the ACWF, specialising in Chinese women's studies and gender studies. As one interviewee put it, 'we are the top national research institution that focuses on women's issues in China' (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). The WSIC is also a formal organisation – similar to the ACWF – characterised by a hierarchical structure, standard operating procedures, and formal processes of recruitment. Moreover, the WSIC's primary function is to implement research projects on issues relating to Chinese women, and these projects are normally funded by the ACWF, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences<sup>14</sup>, and formal international organisations such as the UN and the Ford Foundation (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

### 7.1.2 Civic Associations

Civic associations, as the second organisational type in this study, consisted of nine women's non-governmental organisations (NGOs) adapted to the Chinese context. Except for the Network of Women/Gender Studies (NWGS; Zhejiang) and the West Women (WW; Shaanxi), all remaining organisations are located in Beijing.

As introduced in Chapter 4, according to the *Regulation on Registration and Administration of Social Organisations* (1998), a legal Chinese social organisation must be formally organised and needs to find a 'supervisory unit' within the institutional system in order to register with the Ministry of Civil Affairs. Against this backdrop, as my interviews show, most women's groups do not register as 'social organisations', as they want to keep their distance from the state. However, to guarantee their independence and legal status, these groups, according to regulations issued by the State Council, have to register alternatively as *corporations*. In my sample,

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<sup>14</sup> With affiliation to the State Council, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences is China's top think tank and the largest research organisation in the field of philosophy and social sciences. For more details: [http://casseng.cssn.cn/about/about\\_cass/](http://casseng.cssn.cn/about/about_cass/).

only the West Women (WW) is registered as 'a social organisation' under the supervision of the Shaanxi Research Association (within the CCP's Shaanxi Province Committee), whereas all others are registered as 'corporations'. Moreover, the evidence from my interviews shows that all of these groups have adopted NGO status despite these registration categories.

Hence, it is no surprise that the nine 'civic associations' are characterised by an informal structure and poor resources (e.g. limited number of staff members and money). This situation becomes even worse for those women's groups registered as 'corporations', as they are not allowed to directly receive funding from international donor agencies under the regulations of the State Council (Guo Jianmei, Group Interview, 23 March 2012). Nevertheless, but only to a very limited extent, they can apply for projects or programmes from international donor agencies which can be used as an alternative strategy to get financial support (Hu Ping, Personal Interview, 12 March 2012). In addition, almost all interviewees stated that a lack of resources is a major problem for the survival of women's NGOs in China.

The selected 'civic associations' work on a variety of women's issues: fighting domestic violence (Anti-Domestic Violence Network [ADVN]; The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]), sexual abuse and harassment (The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]; Women Watch in China [WWC]), law reform related to protecting women's rights (Anti-Domestic Violence Network [ADVN]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]), women's development (Gender and Development in China [GAD]; Women Watch in China [WWC]), the portrayal of women in the media (Gender Watch Women's Voice [GWWV]), resistance to male hegemony in academic research (Network of Women/Gender Studies [NWGS]), poverty among rural women (Rural Women [RW]; West Women [WW]; Women Watch in China [WWC]), and equal pay (Women Watch in China [WWC]).

These organisational priorities further reflect that these nine 'civic associations' speak to different groups of Chinese women. These include rural women (Rural Women [RW]; West Women [WW]), female academics (Network of Women/Gender Studies [NWGS]), victims of domestic violence (Anti-Domestic Violence Network [ADVN]; The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC];

Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]), victims of unequal pay (Women Watch in China [WWC]), victims of sexual abuse (The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]; Women Watch in China [WWC]), victims of gender discrimination in the media (Gender Watch Women's Voice [GWWV]), or even broadly to all Chinese women (Gender and Development in China [GAD]; Women Watch in China [WWC]). It is also important to note that, according to the interviews, apart from their prioritised audiences, all these 'civic associations' are concerned with the status of all Chinese women.

To meet their political goals in the Chinese contexts, the common tactics these 'civic associations' have employed include seminars, lectures, training programmes, community service, performance art, and thematic exhibitions. In particular, there are the adopted tactics of The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC), which are carried out in a way that emphasises the provision of a counselling service (Hu Ping, Personal Interview, 12 March 2012), while Woman-Legal Aid (WLA) provides legal services (Guo Jianmei, Group Interview, 23 March 2012). Hence, it is obvious that my sampled 'civic associations' adopt 'a non-confrontational approach to advocacy and civic engagement' (Yang, 2014a, p.113) in order to cater to the Chinese political environment. This is because disruptive and confrontational methods of resistance are under surveillance by the government in the aftermath of the 1989 student movement (see Yang, 2009b).

### **7.1.3 University-Based Centres**

University-based centres in my sample comprise of three groups. Among them, the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU) is located in Guangdong, the Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC) is in Hunan, and the UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC) is in Beijing. The former two cases (SGEF-SYSU and WSC-HBC) primarily work for gender consciousness among students by encouraging them to participate into different activities such as lectures, cultural events, and flash-mobs. These two 'university-based centres' can also be regarded as 'voluntary groups', as they rely on occasional volunteers, including both teaching staff and students, to tackle gender issues. As the principal organiser of the SGEF-SYSU noted, 'despite



being located within the university, we are independent. We don't receive funding from the university. We don't have an office, and we don't have formal staff. We are flexibly organised. But we have a common goal' (Ke Qianting, Personal Interviewee, 11 April 2012). On the other hand, the UNESCO-MG-CUC is purely a research centre that is formally structured and affiliated to the university.

#### **7.1.4 Online Communities**

In relation to online communities, three cases were included: All Eye Shot (AES)<sup>15</sup>, Online Feminism in China (FCN), and Gender and Public Policy in China (GPPC). Yet, based on the interview data, such women's online communities belonged to 'marginalised' groups and attracted limited number of audience. The former two explicitly present their understandings of Chinese feminist politics based on online discussions, while the latter is an information portal in which a collective of scholars gather to disseminate knowledge on gender policy. Unlike the AES and the GPPC, that tend to speak to all Chinese women, the FCN provides an online platform for radical feminists or homosexual women to share their thoughts (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012). Individuals need to fill in a registration form to become members of these three online communities. In addition, only the FCN set up discussion forum while the other two seemed to be simply information portals. In the following sections, I report on the results of how the above-mentioned four types of women's groups used the Internet to work towards the empowerment of Chinese women.

## **7.2 Web Practice of Informing**

In the first place, websites serve as a great opportunity to provide information about an organisation and to share knowledge on specific issues with a wide audience by bypassing the intermediary roles of the mainstream media (della Porta & Mosca, 2009; Edwards, 2004; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Kavada, 2010a; Pudrovskaya & Ferree, 2004; Stein, 2009; van de Donk et al., 2004). In addition, websites constitute an organisation's most public face in order to present information about an advocated political agenda

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<sup>15</sup> 'All Eye Shot' is a metaphor that refers to both men and women use their 'eyes' to watch gender problems. This term is the original English name composed by this group.

to the public (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; della Porta & Mosca, 2009; Foot & Schneider, 2006). Thus, at any point in time, providing up-to-date and accurate information is a core task for an organisation. In my study, data from interviews as well as a features analysis of the websites found that informing is a common practice adopted by women's groups. In the following, I will report on how the women's groups studied used their websites to disseminate information.

### 7.2.1 Providing Organisational Information for Identity Projection

Most staff members interviewed for this study found websites to be essential to the provision of information about the group, which could be considered an important means for increasing organisational recognition. In this respect, they also emphasise the necessity of having a Web presence in the Internet age. The following quotes are illustrative:

‘For women's groups, it is a significant trend to have our own online space, websites specifically, to publicise who we are and what we are doing.’

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

‘[In terms of the organisational publicity...] The impact of the Internet is so enormous in this regard that you can't fail to catch up with it.’

(Tian Ruijuan, Group Interview, 20 February 2012)

In other words, the Internet's capacity for information dissemination provides a great incentive for women's groups to establish their websites. In this respect, the empirical findings showed that this intention was particularly evident among ‘government agencies’ and ‘civic associations’.

In terms of ‘**government agencies**’, features analysis found that the All-China Women's Federations (ACWF) mainly used its website to present in-depth information about its structure, history, and successes as well as the latest news on its organisation's work (Figure 7.1), while the Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC) published a good deal of archival material of scholarly output (Figure 7.2). The reason for the prevalence of this particular type of online content was, as my interviews indicate, simply because the Internet made it easy and convenient for

‘government agencies’ to present their work accomplishments. Furthermore, staff members of ‘government agencies’ agreed that the purposes of setting up their websites were to draw the public’s attention. One staff member from the WSIC summed up this role saying:

‘Now everyone has realised the importance of the Internet: it is a convenient and cheap communication tool; it facilitates dissemination of information that can reach a large audience. So, as a top women’s research institute in China, we want to let more people know what we are doing and provide scholars on women’s studies with more resources, such as our research output. We want to let others know about us. This is a very important reason why we created our own website.’

(Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

At the same time, other participants from the ACWF shared this attitude and saw the website as a must-have component in their work. As one interviewee commented: ‘All [institutional organisations and government bodies] have established their own websites. Thus, as a tool for publicity, we must “occupy” it [the website]’ (Tian Ruijuan, Group Interview, 2 March 2012).

However, Xie Lihua, the founder of Rural Women (RW) who used to work as a chief editor of *China Women’s News* (a national newspaper set up by the All-China Women’s Federation [ACWF]), was more sceptical about government agencies’ purposes for using the Internet in this regard, suggesting that their websites were simply a public relations exercise:

‘All the websites of organisations affiliated to the ACWF<sup>16</sup> are brief and look like newsletters. They just publish what they have done and what they are doing. In other words, all the information provided on their websites is used to present their major accomplishments and to sing the praises of the government’s contribution to women’s advancement. We can’t find any personal views of the ACWF, or appeals against changes for women’s status quo.’

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<sup>16</sup> Here, ‘organisations affiliated to the ACWF’ is treated as a general term to include all the branches, group members, and second-tier associations within the ACWF system (see Section 7.1). Hence, apart from the ACWF, this quote also addressed another sampled group of ‘government agencies’ – the Chinese Women’s Research Network (WSIC).

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

Therefore, ‘government agencies’ consider websites as a new marketing tool, which does not seem to differ very much from their use of traditional media. In this respect, Xie Lihua continued to criticise: ‘They [the ACWF and affiliated organisations] just moved texts written in offline outlets, like newspapers, to their websites’ (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

For ‘*civic associations*’, the findings of my features analysis showed that, like ‘government agencies’, they also relied heavily on websites to present information about the group to the general public. All the analysed websites provided features of ‘about us’, ‘an archive of organisational activities and events’, ‘latest group news’, and ‘featured projects/programmes’ to introduce organisational structure, history, goals and mission, and the current life of the group. In addition, five websites offered an ‘English translation’ of basic information on the group.

Moreover, two websites deliberately used a ‘group declaration’ to emphasise the NGO status of the group, including The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPCC) and Woman-Legal Aid (WLA). In the first case, the founder of the MWPPCC, representing the group rather than as an individual, wrote a long declaration statement to stress the MWPPCC’s role as the first women’s NGO in China. Take for instance the following excerpt:

Being an NGO in China is a dream. Indeed, it is, but this dream has inspired me to achieve for more than 20 years without complaint. In the land of China, the Maple’s establishment not only represents that we have our own NGOs, but more importantly, it reflects a person’s individual agency, a person’s subjectivity, and a person’s strong desire to take part in social affairs.

(Published on the website of the MWPPCC)

For the WLA, the declaration statement was used to show the group’s determination to work as a ‘pure’ NGO even if it was under tight government control:

Goodbye, Peking University! We will be better in the future. We were, we are, and we will always be an NGO devoted to providing legal aid for women in China, as well as guided by NGO principles along this difficult journey!

**Figure 7.1 The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) homepage and online features for the organisation's publicity**



**Figure 7.2 Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC) homepage and online features for the organisation's publicity**



Before 2010, the WLA was supervised by Peking University. In other words, Peking University was the supervisory unit of the WLA according to *The Regulation for Registration and Management of Social Organisations 1998* (see Chapter 4). However, the WLA was kicked out of Peking University in 2010 for political reasons and was registered as a 'corporation'. Although interviewees avoided talking about what had happened at that time, it is likely that certain legal aid cases the group provided touched on the government's baseline. This is hinted at by the comment of the WLA founder:

‘I am often invited to the police station to “have a cup of tea” even if the investigators have a clear sense that our group does not do anything to threaten national security. But I just need to go to there, as they need to take records of our group’s activities.’

(Guo Jianmei, Group Interview, 23 March 2012).

Thus, government control is a major factor that the WLA needs to consider, and it is no surprise that the group’s website is also under surveillance (Guo Jianmei, Group Interview, 23 March 2012).

Another reason for the censorship of WLA was its goals and mission: to provide a legal aid service for women and promote law reform, which is a politically sensitive issue in China. Lin Lixia, who was both the administrative officer in the WLA and the leader of Women Watch in China (WWC), explained:

‘Most women’s NGOs in China deliver services in communities, which, in the eyes of the government, are not sensitive. This is because their targets are people in communities and the services they deliver do not have political influence. By contrast, the work the WLA is involved in promotes law and policy reform, which has political influence around the country. This is why the government has paid “special care” to us.’

(Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012)

This also became evident in the interviews of the remaining ‘civic associations’. For those delivering services (e.g. The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Rural Women [RW]), staff members clearly stated that their groups did not put censorship as the first priority when they published information about the group on their website. On the other hand, for those promoting law reform (e.g. Anti-Domestic Violence Network [ADV]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]; Women Watch in China [WWC]), the interviewees agreed they were very careful about what information was published on the websites because of online censorship.

Apart from features analysis of the websites, my interview data also suggests that, like ‘government agencies’, ‘civic associations’ treated websites as a new platform to stress their organisational identities. Hu Ping, a programme coordinator working in The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC), noted in this regard: ‘We use the website to present our group beliefs as well as to show the latest

progress of our projects to the public' (Personal Interview, 12 March 2012). Others more often employed the metaphor 'window' to state this particular type of purpose. One programme coordinator working in the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N) summed up this role, saying:

'We build the website as "a platform window" through which we can share our organisational beliefs with scholars, students, and the common public who are interested in fighting domestic violence. We understand the role of the website as a window opening on to us, as well as a platform for advocacy for fighting domestic violence.'

(Liu Xiaojuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012)

This is because women's NGOs (i.e. 'civic associations'), overall, are marginalised and often pushed to the periphery in Chinese society (Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012; Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). In this sense, the Internet was the only choice for 'civic associations' to enhance the group's visibility (Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012).

The reason for this 'only choice' situation is also related to civic associations' struggles over resources, which is a common problem for them. As the founder of Rural Women (RW) put it:

'For women's groups ['civic associations'], due to financial constraints and staff shortages, the construction of our websites is at an early stage. In order to gain more resources, we primarily use our websites to publish information about our identities, organisational activities, character, and mission.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

As such, 'Websites of women's NGOs are basically online brochures' (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). Feng Yuan, who was the main administrator of the website of the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N), concurred with this point and stressed the fact that her group was rather short-staffed in order to best accommodate the use of the website for disseminating information (Personal Interview, 21 March 2012). Another interviewee, Gao Yucong, who was the webmaster of The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MW PCC), acknowledged that she was too busy to devote sufficient time to update the website, because she was,



at the same time, the public relations officer of the MWPPC, and so much of her of time was spent in real-world work (Personal Interview, 19 March 2012).

Even so, some interviewees still expressed their hope for developing their websites into a news portal instead of a simple 'online brochure'. This desire was particularly strong for Rural Women (RW), as the founder Xie Lihua explained:

'I hope that our website can be more interactive – that is, we could develop it into a portal site. This means that one day, if rural women or immigrant women workers want to go online, their first choice would not be the commercial portals any more, but *Rural Women.com*. These women could obtain various types of information through Rural Women.com, including jobs, rights protection, agricultural products, etc. We really hope we can achieve this goal, but we need money and IT professionals.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012; emphasis added)

The quote above also indicates that 'civic associations' needed to compete with big commercial websites for audiences, but they do not have advantages in this regard. As Xie Lihua continued to remark:

'Because our website is not a commercial one, we need to get financial support to help us develop it. We tried to contact several venture capital firms but failed, because they did not see the commercial prospect of our website, but we would never change our website into a commercial portal... It is very difficult for women's NGOs to solve this dilemma.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

Regardless of a lack of resources, website producers' knowledge on the status of Chinese women is another key factor that influences the accuracy of the information provided. That said, even if the group had sufficient money to recruit someone to produce the content, prioritised consideration still needed to be given as to whether or not the to-be-appointed webmaster had a proper understanding of women's issues (Liu Xiao Juan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012).

Among '**university-based centres**', only participants from the UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC) explicitly stated that their website was an important tool to enhance their visibility among the public (Group Interview, 14 March 2012). As one interviewee put it, 'We

hope in the cyber-world that the public could know our about existence, so we take care to publish our centre's research activities as well as scholarly output on the website' (Li Huiqun, Group Interview, 14 March 2012). For the other two 'university-based centres', the data from interviews and features analysis indicate that they used the websites more as tools for spreading knowledge about gender or feminism, rather than as an instrument for group publicity (I will demonstrate this in a later section).

Finally, the data sources suggest that '*online communities*' understood that websites were not just used to seek wider public attention, but also for mobilising like-minded people to participate in a serious discussion about feminism and gender equality (I will come back to this in a later section). Yet, it is worth noting that the key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN), who were interviewed for this study, mentioned that they were not committed to publicising the website. Worse yet, similar to 'civic associations', the FCN also faced competition from mainstream commercial websites. In this respect, as one key moderator put it, 'We cannot attract a big audience. This problem does not only exist on our site, but in all marginalised online communities. We cannot compete against either Sina.com or Tencent.com' (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

### **7.2.2 Disseminating Information to Raise Public Awareness of Gender Issues**

Apart from providing information about the organisation, websites also serve as platforms for spreading knowledge on specific issues to raise public awareness about them (see della Porta & Mosca, 2009; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004). For many staff members of the participant women's groups, the informing capacity of the Internet suited their needs to provide knowledge about gender or feminist issues. Although the Chinese government has rhetorically attempted to legislate against inequality between men and women and to pursue gender equality as a basic state policy since the early 1950s (see Chapter 4), in the mind of most NGO staff members, Chinese people were still rather vague in their understanding about the issue of gender equality. In this regard, Dong Lin, a staff member of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), noted:

‘The 1980s’ economic reform also resulted in the emergence of women’s problems in every walk of life, and since then people have often been confused about the issue of equality between men and women: What is it? What is the content? In this respect, people need help to understand themselves from the perspective of gender and need help to understand equality between men and women.’

(Dong Lin, Group Interview, 20 February 2012).

At the same time, Gao Yucong, who was both the public relations officer and the webmaster of The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPCC), observed:

‘People in China generally lack awareness of gender issues. Thus, on our website, we provide a large amount of information as well as our beliefs and values in this regard, to promote people’s awareness of women issues. We need the website to help the public develop a clearer sense of gender issues in China.’

(Gao Yucong, Personal Interview, 19 March 2012)

This is very much the case for ‘*university-based centres*’, as mentioned already, whose original intention was to transform their websites into a public lecturing space to educate the public about the concepts of gender or feminism. As Ke Qianting, one of core organisers of Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU), put it:

‘We launched the website in 2003 – eight years after the UN’s Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW [see Chapter 4]). After these eight years, it was true that the distribution of knowledge about gender was not bad in China, but we still felt that it had not become “common” knowledge. Many people had never heard about the FWCW, lacked a good understanding of feminism, or even still thought feminism as an “evil” ... It will be a long and difficult process to integrate the notion of gender into the context of China. In addition, there is always a lack of multifaceted research on Western theories about gender. Thus, we really need a platform to generate and disseminate new knowledge about gender. In this respect, the website becomes our ideal choice.’

(Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012)

Participants of the UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC) concurred with this perspective, saying that their role as a university-based centre helped them to use their website in order to present accurate information about gender to the public (Group Interview, 14 March 2012). This is also obvious on the website for the Women's Studies Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC) where site visitors can learn 'what gender or feminism is' through a range of lecture slides and scholarly articles provided by the group.

Yet, it is worth noting that the remaining women's groups (i.e. 'government agencies', 'civic associations', and 'online communities') also attest to the importance of websites in terms of spreading expert knowledge about women's issues. Along with 'university-based centres', all the examined women's groups frequently offered 'news articles and reports', a 'guide to further reading', 'featured projects', 'policy and law analysis', 'slogan', 'newsletter', and the 'tag' feature to enhance visibility of various women's issues with their site visitors (see Table 7.1).

However, about what women's issues have the participant women's groups made efforts to create heightened public awareness? At the outset, there is no doubt that they showed their desire to educate the public on the issue of 'what is gender equality in China?' on their websites, but this was guided by different organisational goals. '**Government agencies**' (i.e. the All-China Women's Federation [ACWF] and the Chinese Women's Research Network [WSIC]), mainly focused on the policy aspects of gender equality. In this regard, one member of the ACWF asserted that the achievement of gender equality could not merely rely on women themselves, but more importantly 'needs the help of policy makers to promote gender equality, as they can provide a friendly atmosphere from the level of national policy,' (Wang Xueping, Group Interview, 20 February 2012).

*Table 7.1 Online features of informing for spreading expert knowledge about women's issues*

	News articles and reports	Guide to further reading	Projects	Policy/law analysis	Slogan	Newsletter	Tag
<b>Government Agencies</b>							
All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)	◆		◆	◆	◆		
Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆		
<b>Civic Associations</b>							
Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVNI)	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	◆	
Gender and Development in China (GAD)	◆	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆
Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV)	◆	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆
The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC)	◆	◆	◆		◆	◆	
Network of Women/Gender Studies (NWGS)	◆		◆		◆		
Rural Women (RW)	◆		◆				
West Women (WW)	◆		◆				
Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)	◆		◆	◆		◆	
Women Watch in China (WWC)	◆		◆	◆	◆		
<b>University-Based Centres</b>							
Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU)	◆	◆	◆		◆		
Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC)	◆	◆					
UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC)	◆	◆					
<b>Online Communities</b>							
All Eye Shot (AES)	◆	◆					
Online Feminism in China (FCN)	◆	◆		◆			
Gender and Public Policy in China (GPPC)	◆	◆					

This is reflected in the websites of both the ACWF and the WSIC. On the former site, the ACWF displayed an eye-catching column on the issue of ‘state policy of gender equality’, by directing visitors to a new web page in which the ACWF listed a range of articles to help the public understand ‘what is the state policy of gender equality in China?’. On the latter site, the WSIC singled out a ‘policy and law analysis’ section detailing all national and local regulations that mentioned gender equality. In addition, as a top national women’s research institute, the WSIC used their website to present a broad picture of gender equality centred on the slogan ‘Equality, Development, Peace’<sup>17</sup>. As an anonymous interviewee noted:

‘On our website, we produce different types of information regarding women’s studies, including the most recent development of research on gender issues around the globe, the most recent publications on gender studies in China. We also collect as much recent news on gender equality as we can and publish this on the website.’

(Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

Of the information published on the website, the WSIC placed particular importance on issues such as the same retirement age between men and women, women’s health (e.g. breast cancer, cervical cancer), and women’s participation in policy decision-making (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

Therefore, the Internet helped ‘government agencies’ distribute information concerning the general direction of Chinese gender equality in a top-down manner. By contrast, the presented issues around gender equality tackled by the remaining women’s groups were more specific. In this regard, interviews with staff members as well as an examination of the websites in question indicated that ‘fighting domestic violence against women’ was the most common issue for ‘*civic associations*’. Of these, the key actor was the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV), as their presented slogan particularly stressed: ‘Give women a non-violent world!’ (published on the

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<sup>17</sup> The WSIC’s slogan was adapted from the theme of the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) held in Beijing 1995: ‘Action for Equality, Development, and Peace’. This conference, as mentioned in Chapter 4, was a watershed in the development of gender equality in China.

ADVANCE website). This also became evident in the interviews. For instance, as their leader Feng Yuan said:

‘We published a significant amount of information about fighting domestic violence on our website, including our books and translated documents, as well as books and research documents from other sources.’

(Feng Yuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012).

In a similar vein, the programme coordinator Liu Xiaojuan commented:

‘On our website, we present news, publications, and documents – all the information is about fighting domestic violence. We also share the experiences of intervention in domestic violence around the country. For instance, Hunan was the first province in China to formulate an anti-domestic violence policy, and we often wrote articles and updated news to introduce how their anti-domestic violence communities were established.’

(Liu Xiaojuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012)

For other ‘civic associations’, while the presented information on their websites was not dominated by domestic violence, this issue was often occurred in the news section and was listed in the special coverage section, of four group websites (Gender and Development [GAD]; Gender Watch Women’s Voice [GWWV]; The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; West Women [WW]). In addition, fighting domestic violence was a major subject in the ‘policy and law analysis’ section of Woman-Legal Aid (WLA) and Women Watch in China (WWC).

At the same time, interviews with staff members suggested that many ‘civic associations’ placed great importance on the issue of ‘rural women’s rights’ on their websites. This was very evident on the website of Rural Women (RW), in which all the information presented online was concerned with rural women’s development, such as literacy, participation in public or political affairs, and improving the status of migrant workers (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). In addition, since 2006, Women Watch in China (WWC) had carried out a project focusing on land rights for rural women, through training, fieldwork, and the proposal of regulation amendments; they published all information they had obtained on their website to

draw the public's attention (Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). West Women (WW) was another group that addressed the issue of rural women's rights, which was clearly manifest in the website sections of 'featured projects' and 'news articles and reports'.

Finally, some specific issues targeted generally at all Chinese women were also raised by participant 'civic associations' and were presented on their websites for the public. For example, the problems of sexual harassments in the workplace and equal pay were discussed on the site of Women Watch in China (WWC) (Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). Women's development was the most important theme on the site of Gender and Development (GAD), while the equal treatment of women in the media was explicitly mentioned on the site of Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV) (Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012). In addition, the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN) used their website to explain the New Marriage Law for the general public (Feng Yuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012). At this stage of the research, all of the above topics were salient women's issues written into the national legislative framework (see Chapter 4), such as the '*Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Rights and Interests of Women*' (《中华人民共和国妇女权益保障法》) and the '*Outline of Women's Development in China*' (《中国妇女发展纲要》).

When it comes to '**online communities**', the results showed that all three websites (All Eye Shot [AES]; Online Feminism in China [FCN]; and Gender and Public Policy in China [GPPC]) were used as open research forums to discuss issues around feminism from an academic perspective. For instance, on the homepage of the AES, the group clearly stated:

The academic objective of All Eye Shot: to scrutinise the concept of gender and women's problems from the vantage point of Chinese patriarchal culture.

(Published on the AES website)

Following this principle, the AES site published a large number of academic writers' articles that focused on the reality of adaptation of Western feminism to the Chinese context. This was also evident on the GPPC site, in which a collective of scholars



working together to create an information portal about women and policies posted this excerpt on the 'about us' section of their website:

We are a group of people committed to the issue of gender and public policy. We use faith, passion and rationality to develop our own pages. [...]

We use our knowledge to identify gender bias in current policies. [...]

We are eager to use our knowledge to press for equal opportunities between men and women both in family life and in the workplace. [...]

(Published on the GPPC website)

In an interview, one moderator of Online Feminism in China (FCN) clearly defined the FCN as 'an online forum for discussing theories of gender equality' (Yu Tinging, Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). This is because she believed that 'theories have an affinity with expression, and expression is a type of action, which some day would develop into collective action.' (Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). In particular, the FCN placed a focus on gay rights, sexual rights, and feminist rights (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012). Yet, for the time being, in the mind of many of my interviewees, these topics were of interest to a small group of followers, as they had not been readily accepted by the general public in China.

There is no doubt that all of my examined women's groups attempted to use their websites to raise public awareness of gender issues through disseminating information concerning different aspects of women's issues. Yet, many staff members were at pains to stress the difficulty of improving Chinese people's knowledge of gender equality within the confines of the existing patriarchal culture, as the dominance of men over women is still the predominant stereotype. They provided a range of examples to demonstrate this phenomenon. For instance, in the group interview with ACWF staff members, Dong Lin referred to her previous lecturing experiences and recalled how rural teenage girls gave up their educational opportunities in favour of furthering their brothers' education, in accordance with their parents' orders to them to do this. Dong Lin's example, along with those provided by others, confirmed the social reality that, in China, changing people's stereotyped cultural values about women was an urgent

but long process. This situation was summed up by Yu Tingting, one of key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN), when she said:

‘China’s current discourse of “gender” actually draws lessons from the West, and the concept of “equality” is also imported from the West. However, the core values of Western equality are incompatible with Chinese traditional culture. [...] It is very difficult for Chinese women to have self-awareness, because a patriarchal culture has existed for thousands of years and continues as a fact of daily existence. Many women have taken it for granted that they should stay at home, do the housework, and look after children, while their husbands go outside the home for career advancement. They think this is their fate, and it is normal for them to be inferior to men. This is why it is very difficult to make our nation wake up to gender equality.’

(Yu Tingting, Personal Interview, 3 March 2012)

This quote also shows the necessity of individual women to raise their own consciousness about the issue, which was another important concern for my studied women’s groups during the process of disseminating knowledge about gender. Many of my interviewees were at pains to comment that, generally, women themselves had a lack of gender awareness, agency, or confidence. In this respect, three women’s groups tried to publish ‘slogans’ on their websites to remind women about the importance of self-identification. These included:

Self-Esteem, Self-Confidence, Self-Reliance, Self-Improvement

(All-China Women’s Federation [ACWF])

Give you a fruit, you could only share once; Give you a seed, you could have it a lifetime

(Rural Women [RW])

Be the change you want to see in the world

(Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University [SGEF/SYSU])

In this respect, most of my interviewees agreed that, for women, it was still traditional cultural norms that disrupted the process of self-development.

### **7.3 Creating a Sense of the Collective through the Internet**

In this section, I shall discuss the ways in which the studied women's groups used the Internet to facilitate communication with individual supporters, and to see if a sense of the collective has emerged. The empirical data from the interviews as well as the features analysis indicated that websites, QQ discussion groups, microblogs, and email lists constituted the primary communication spaces of these women's groups. Thus, in what follows, I will focus on these four Web platforms to present the results from this analysis.

#### **7.3.1 Websites, Public Space, and Affiliation to Women's Groups**

In my study, the intention of women's groups to make connections with the public was clearly manifested in their websites, as they offered various opportunities for a site visitor to become affiliated with the organisation. As seen in Table 7.2, the most common feature was the provision of an 'organisational email address' for site visitors to directly contact the group. There were also different choices in what position to join (e.g. 'volunteers', 'official members', 'staff members', 'email list subscribers', 'followers of the group's social media', and 'client consultation'), as well as an invitation to publicise the group (e.g. 'share this site').

At this point, it is worth noting that only five women's groups (see Table 7.2) provided the general public with access to register as 'official members' – a much lower number than I had initially expected. The reason for this reluctance to have 'official members' was not clearly explained by the staff members who attended the interviews for my study, but it was a subject that was mentioned by the one of those five groups. For these group actors, a likely explanation is that they produce some pieces of confidential information that must only be given to an 'inner ring'. This means that any interested people need to be registered as 'official members' to be included in the 'inner ring', as they were requested to fill in application forms providing detailed personal information, including real name, gender, age, mobile, and address. Based on such a membership database, these groups might feel at ease communicating with registered 'official members'. This is particularly important for Online Feminism in China (FCN). In the interview, the site administrator described a time when her group decided to include a 'Queer' section on their website. They realised this would be a

‘dangerous’ topic to be censored, so for political safety reasons they set this section up as a ‘member-only’ section (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

Nevertheless, there is a strong possibility that the provision of registration information might put personal privacy at risk, which could explain why the majority of my sampled groups did not encourage individuals to become ‘official members’. Meanwhile, filling out the online registration form can be a time-consuming process, which might be another possible reason for its limited presence on these websites. In contrast, the options to become ‘email list subscribers’ or ‘followers of the group’s social media’ made it much easier for individuals to become affiliated to these women’s groups.

In addition, interviews with staff members suggested that ‘civic associations’ and ‘online communities’ expressed a stronger desire than ‘government agencies’ and ‘university-based centres’ to invite site visitors to join them. Indeed, recruitment of individual supporters might not be a top priority for *‘government agencies’*, as interview respondents repeatedly emphasised that the organisations affiliated to the All-China Women’s Federation (ACWF; see Footnote 1) were all resource-rich, especially in terms of personnel. As the anonymous interviewee from the Chinese Women’s Research Network (WSIC) noted, one key advantage of the organisations within the ACWF system was that they had a large number of long-term staff to support their work (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). This suggests that the websites of ‘government agencies’ serve little purpose in terms of engaging individuals. At the same time, as already discussed (see Section 7.2.1), the overall focus of the ‘government agencies’ sites was to publicise the organisation’s information to visitors. Hence, it is possible that the features presented on their websites (see Table 7.2) were indeed used as an alternative method to draw public attention.

In a similar manner, staff members of *‘university-based centres’* also did not stress the importance of their websites for inviting individual supporters to get involved, because these organisations already had a rich source of students to draw upon. In this respect, it is no surprise that the feature of ‘volunteers’ on their websites was targeted at university-based students instead of the general public.

For ‘civic associations’ and ‘online communities’, the need for affiliation was much more pressing than for the above-mentioned two types of group actors. In terms

of '*civic associations*', staff members agreed that they preferred to use their website to attract more individual supporters. As the founder of Rural Women (RW) noted, her group was quite willing to develop its own website into an interactive platform in which a like-minded aggregate of people could gather (Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

On the other hand, one of the main purposes of '*online communities*' was to mobilise like-minded people to participate in a serious discussion about feminism and gender equality. This is clearly shown in the 'about us' section of the analysed websites:

*We welcome your attention to the change of global gender culture. [...] We seek to engage in a dialogue with you to build a new cultural space characterised by equality, democracy, and interactivity.*

(Published on the website of All Eye Shot [AES])

Welcome to Feminist.cn, the first of its kind in China that collects feminist academic resources, and offers the latest feminist insights, information and research from a variety of sources. [...] *We are looking forward to hearing from you!*

(Published on the website of Online Feminism in China [FCN])

On this website, we feature participation and interaction: you can take part in the discussion, you can post comments, you can express any views about gender-related issues. [...] *We are looking forward to your participation!*

(Published on the website of Gender and Public Policy in China [GPPC])

In particular, the FCN was keen to build 'a meeting place' for those women who admitted they were 'feminists', or even 'radical feminists', to exchange ideas on the online platform (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

While features on the websites of both 'civic associations' and 'online communities' clearly showed that they attached great importance to affiliation, in reality the number of individual supporters who joined them via the Internet was rather limited. This was particularly the case with those that followed the online instruction to become 'volunteers' of a group. For instance, when asked how often

individuals sent requests to be volunteers via the Internet, the founder of Rural Women (RW) replied saying:

‘Not too many, and indeed very few... This is because in China “being a volunteer” is not a professional occupation, and young people are under huge pressure to live. They can do it in the short term but not the long term.’

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

Quite a similar response was elicited in one reply from the administrator of Online Feminism in China (FCN):

‘Our registered volunteers, in fact, do not always understand who the FCN is. They may hope our group can give them more working opportunities and enhance their practical skills. When they learn that our group is just an “online community” without any “actual” projects to work on, they choose to leave...’

(Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012)

In this respect, the Internet may not play a crucial role in helping women’s groups recruit volunteers to support their work, as the underlying intention of people who became volunteers of a group is to advance their career rather than to contribute to the cause.

Yet, an exceptional case in this regard was The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC), as Gao Yucong put it: ‘Our volunteers agree with the MWPPC beliefs, and they are willing to commit their time and efforts’ (Personal Interview, 19 March 2012). This is because the MWPPC has a historical reliance on volunteers for supporting the group, and volunteers have become an integral part of the organisation. According to the MWPPC offline leaflet (2008), there was at the time around 700 volunteers; among them, nine had served for more than 15 years, 22 for more than ten years, and 38 for more than five years.

Finally, it is important to note that two ‘civic associations’ (see Table 7.2) encouraged female victims of domestic violence and sexual harassment or abuse to register under ‘client consultation’ – details of which were provided on these websites. This might be related to the mission of these two groups (see Section 7.1.2). More specifically, The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC) was

the first women's group in China to open a hotline service in order to provide female victims with consultation, while Woman-Legal Aid was the first to offer legal advice. In my interviews with staff members of these two groups, interviewees stressed that consultation helped to raise the gender consciousness of female victims, following which these 'beneficiary' women could pass the information to others in the same situation. In addition, online registration for 'client consultation' might be a direct and efficient method to encourage more victimised women to seek help, as all their provided information would remain highly confidential within the group which in turn protected their privacy.

*Table 7.2 Online features for creating connections with the public*

	Group Email	Volunteers	Staff Members	Official Members	Email List	Social Media	Client Consultation	Share the Site
<b>Government Agencies</b>								
All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)						◆		
Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)	◆		◆	◆				
<b>Civic Associations</b>								
Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVNI)	◆	◆			◆			
Gender and Development in China (GAD)	◆		◆		◆			
Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWV)	◆	◆	◆		◆	◆		
The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPC)	◆	◆		◆	◆	◆	◆	◆
Network of Women/Gender Studies (NWGS)	◆			◆				
Rural Women (RW)	◆	◆	◆			◆		
West Women (WW)	◆	◆	◆					
Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)	◆	◆	◆			◆	◆	◆
Women Watch in China (WWC)	◆	◆	◆		◆			◆
<b>University-Based Centres</b>								
Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU)	◆	◆				◆		
Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC)	◆	◆						
UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC)	◆							
<b>Online Communities</b>								
All Eye Shot (AES)	◆							
Online Feminism in China (FCN)	◆	◆		◆		◆		
Gender and Public Policy in China (GPPC)	◆			◆		◆		



### 7.3.2 Public Communication versus Private Communication

Various authors have pointed out that the Internet can afford the best opportunity for an organisation to interact with individual supporters through conversations, dialogue, or discussion, which constitutes an essential aspect of collective identity construction (e.g. della Porta & Mosca, 2009; Kavada, 2009; Kavada, 2012, 2015; Nip, 2004; Pini et al., 2004; Stein, 2009). This is because these interactive actions facilitate the process through which individuals develop a shared position with the group and thus help to maintain the organisation's cause.

In my study, there was a marked difference in interactivity that occurred on the public Web platforms versus those on private platforms. In the former, the results found that only a few women's groups offered a limited set of interactive features on their *websites* – the primary public channel of communication – to invite registered 'official members' or interested visitors of the public to comment, discuss, exchange ideas, or seek advice (Table 7.3). Worse still, staff members from these groups were at pains to stress the low interactivity on their websites. In replying to why people did not communicate with the group via the website, one of moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN) observed:

'Online discussion is usually spontaneous and more open to improvised dialogue. The communication ends when the discussion is over. While many people can be involved in the discussion, *very few people* will stay and keep speaking in the long run. This is because "speakers" can choose any place in the cyber-world to settle in.'

(Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012; emphasis added)

Another interviewee, Yu Tingting, also from the FCN, was very much in accord with this perspective saying: 'The cyber-world is a virtual space. People can choose to enter an occasion or to leave in a very flexible manner' (Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). In this respect, the low degree of interactivity between the group and supporters may have resulted from the limitations of the Internet in its demands for commitment.

At the same time, some staff members maintained that their groups decided to limit the opportunities for interaction of their own accord. On this point, they found

that online censorship was a particularly important factor. For instance, Lin Lixia, the core organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC), commented:

‘Currently our website has a comments function, but we have realised that launching a “Write your comments” section has risks – that is, we cannot control what the visitors will post. Their “improper” words would finally become our responsibility. Hence, we don’t want to further develop this interactive function; neither have we paid special attention to it.’

(Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012)

Chen Yaya, one of the key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN), adopted a similar stance, further reflecting on the negative consequences of visitor comments:

‘I need to often check the online content produced by visitors. There are two sections I need to pay attention to: comments and discussion forums, especially the latter as it receives tightened online censorship. [...] Sometimes, I could find pornographic advertisements left on these two sections, and then I need to delete them immediately. This is because, if they were detected by the Internet police, they would use this as an excuse to shut down our website.’

(Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012)

Therefore, due to China’s online censorship (see Chapter 4), the limited interaction on some women’s groups sites, especially those of ‘civic associations’ and ‘online communities’, could be interpreted further as a mechanism for reducing the risk of being blocked. This is because these group actors cannot determine what views people will express on their websites.

Another reason for women’s groups not being actively involved in the process of developing interactive features on their websites was their limited resources. As Lin Lixia, the core organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC), explained: ‘Our group is really short-handed, so we can’t promptly reply to readers’ comments. It is impossible for us to have frequent communication with them’ (Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). Another interviewee, Gao Yucong, who was the webmaster of The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC), also described how she felt about the relationship between site users and the group, saying it was ‘not close, as

I don't have too much time to manage it [the interactive features on the website]' (Personal Interview, 19 March 2012).

Although most women's groups in my study showed their reluctance to develop communication functions on their websites, some still tried to arouse the interest of users by regularly posting on a thematic issue for them to discuss. One of the key group actors in this regard was Online Feminism in China (FCN), as the site administrator Chen Yaya noted:

'In an actual situation, I, at times, write posts centred around a special issue, trying to invite readers to have a discussion. If the issue happens to be a "hot topic" and has already become a topic of intense interest among readers, it would receive many replies. In contrast, if the issue is neither a "hot topic" nor noticed by any readers, it would soon fade away.'

(Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012)

In this respect, she referred to two popular postings that had focussed on the subjects of 'personal lesbian experiences' and 'occupying men's toilets'<sup>18</sup> respectively, both of which drew much response. Her narration also suggested that the cultivation of a collective sense was closely related to the extent to which postings were engaging.

Yet, this strategy may cause struggles between click rates and the aim of the group. For instance, in the interview with the FCN administrator, Chen Yaya continued to comment about the fact that focusing on the number of replies her content received would mean discussing sexuality or pornography for example (Personal Interview, 2 March 2012). These topics would not be consistent with the group's aim to build a gathering place for feminists to exchange ideas or to hear each other's voices. She also recalled how the popular posting concerning 'personal lesbian experiences' became an online dating space that contained sexual innuendoes – 'an unexpected factor that made the posting receive such a high number of replies, but I deleted those messages' (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

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<sup>18</sup> In February 2012, several groups of female university students protested about the limited number of public toilets in major cities in China (e.g. Beijing and Guangzhou), calling for more cubicles for women. They dubbed it 'Occupying Men's Toilets'.

Furthermore, according to the interviews with staff members, despite the fact that some women's groups realised the importance of *microblogs* for direct communication with the public, they did not actively engage in the processes of managing these. In this regard, they showed their concerns about organisational credibility, because the distribution of information through microblogging platforms moved too swiftly to cope with. As Liu Xiaojuan, the programme coordinator of Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN), explained:

'We really thought of creating a Weibo account, as we had seen the significant influence of Weibo among people, especially among young people; however, we hesitated to do so. This is because if we could not provide a continuous, professional follow-up, we would not play a guiding role to help the public understand our views, stance, or beliefs. We would be completely obscured by "crowds". This is why we dare not open a Weibo account.'

(Liu Xiaojuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012)

In addition, a lack of resources, again, became a major factor that prevented women's groups from creating Weibo accounts, when taking into consideration the organisation's credibility in the eyes of the general public. This is evident in the remarks of Lin Lixia, the core organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC):

'If we want to use Weibo to facilitate interaction with individuals, we need a staff member fully equipped with a theoretical analysis of women's issues to reply to them. If the staff member is not professional enough, her/his words might cause adverse effects. Unfortunately, at the moment, we don't have sufficient resources to recruit such a professional to manage our Weibo account if we opened one.'

(Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012)

At the same time, for those groups who already owned a Weibo accounts (The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Rural Women [RW]), resources and administrator knowledge on gender issues were also key factors that restricted the development of microblogs in terms of interaction. As the leader of the RW put it,

‘We don’t manage our Weibo well. This is because our staff members do not earn a high income and they can’t afford a smart phone. So, they can’t use the mobile phone to update Weibo at any time, in any place. Meanwhile, their understanding of women’s issues is not thorough enough to respond to comments in a very accurate manner. They can just write simple sentences to describe today’s organisational activities, or to repost.’

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

This reluctance to fulfil the interactive roles of microblogs was also accompanied by the serious backlash against feminism in China. Lv Pin, one of the main organisers of both Gender and Development in China (GAD) and Gender Watch Women’s Voice (GWWV), noted in this regard:

‘The main purpose of our Weibo is to find like-minded people; I mean they have a shared stance with us and they have the desire to understand feminism in a non-biased way. We use Weibo to build a gathering place for these people rather than to pursue high visibility. It is not good for feminism to be seen by many people, as it would bring about flaming. If it happened like that, the negative responses we would receive would be much more than the positive ones, and this indeed would be a form of invalid communication. This is not we want; rather, what we want is to only influence those people who are willing to be influenced by us and communicate with them. So we hoped we could attract a small group through the use of social media.’

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012)

Following this principle, when asked about the comments the GAD and the GWWV received on their Weibo pages, Lv Pin observed that most of them were friendly and supportive, simply because commentators were largely ‘friends’ of the groups.

It is also important to note that, according to interviews with staff members, three women’s groups (i.e. Gender Watch Women’s Voice [GWWV]; The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre [MWPPC]; Online Feminism in China [FCN]) provided opportunities for individual supporters to directly interact with them in a more private space. The primary platform in this respect is the **QQ discussion group** created by the women’s group, the interactivity of which ran in sharp contrast to public channels of communication, as mentioned above. In my interviews with staff members of these groups, respondents stressed that not only did participants often send

feedback to the administrators of the QQ group, but also there was strong interaction among them. This was more the result of the way the QQ discussion group was administered, as interested people needed to send their requests to the team of administrators and waited for approval. For instance, in replying to how they authorised supporters' applications to join the QQ discussion group, Yu Tinting, the FCN moderator, explained:

'I usually first check why they want to join our team. Then, I let them briefly introduce their work and education background. Importantly, how did they realise that they agreed with feminist ideas? Is it because of the requirements for work or study? Or is it because they have experienced oppression or struggles in their daily lives?'

(Yu Tinting, Personal Interview, 3 March 2012)

This strategy was also applicable to the QQ discussion groups created by the other two women's groups – the GWWV and the MWPC. In this way, the administrators of the QQ group may have a clearer sense of participants' identities. Moreover, they were able to introduce newcomers to pre-existing members, as well as to moderate online discussions, which in turn fostered the processes of developing the sense of a collective.

It is of interest to note here that these three groups also extended their interaction with participants in their QQ discussion groups to other communication spaces. For the MWPC, the members of the QQ discussion group were all volunteers, and the organisation regularly offered offline lessons to train volunteers, which in turn facilitated communication among them (Gao Yucong, Personal Interview, 19 March 2012). Similarly, in terms of the FCN, the moderators at times organised face-to-face meetings (e.g. workshops) for interested members of the QQ discussion group (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012; Yu Tinting, Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). Yet, for the GWWV, face-to-face encounters were not managed in the name of the group, but voluntarily by members of the QQ discussion group; instead, the GWWV often invited members to write articles for the group's newsletter (Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012).

Finally, my interviews with staff members found that **email lists** played a crucial role for the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV) and Women Watch in China (WWC) in promoting these groups' views and core values to subscribers. Specifically,

the ADVN mainly used their email list to keep participants up to date with the latest information about issues around domestic violence (Liu Xiaojuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012), while the content of the WWC email list was related to women's rights (Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). However, no interactive elements were found as the ADVN and WWC considered their email lists more of a private channel for diffusing information than as a venue for fostering discussion. More importantly, based on my observation of these email lists, only the administrators (from these two groups) had the power to send messages to subscribers. In other words, members of email lists did not have the opportunity to communicate between themselves or directly to the group because of these settings. This indicates that email lists indeed did not play a role in interaction while they were more used as a tool for information sharing.

*Table 7.3 Interactive features adopted across sites*

	Comments	Online Polls	Discussion Forums	Readers' Articles
<b>Government Agencies</b>				
All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)				
Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)				
<b>Civic Associations</b>				
Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN)	◆			
Gender and Development in China (GAD)				
Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV)	◆			
The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC)	◆			◆
Network of Women/Gender Studies (NWGS)			◆	
Rural Women (RW)				
West Women (WW)	◆	◆		
Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)	◆			
Women Watch in China (WWC)	◆			
<b>University-Based Centres</b>				
Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU)		◆		
Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College (WSC-HBC)		◆	◆	◆
UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC)				
<b>Online Communities</b>				
All Eye Shot (AES)				
Online Feminism in China (FCN)	◆	◆	◆	◆
Gender and Public Policy in China (GPPC)	◆	◆	◆	



#### 7.4 A New Space for Political Campaigns within an Authoritarian Context?

‘To the government’s eyes, online protests involve politically sensitive areas with a potential threat to national security, even the big-name sites (e.g. Sina, Sohu) dare not mention. [...] Even so, I still think the Internet is an important instrument for us to organise actions, because it is impossible for the Internet police to censor every corner of cyberspace and to delete every “threatening” message. There is an overload of information... We should use the Internet, and, for us, the Internet is a must-have.’

(Guo Jianmei<sup>19</sup>, Group Interview, 23 March 2012)

In my study, one of the main critiques concerning online campaigns referred to the risks of censorship, as highlighted above by one of our interviewees. In fact, there were four interviewed staff members who mentioned that they had the experience of being invited to a police station<sup>20</sup> because they had posted some messages about mobilisation activities online. Yet, all four of these interviewees found that the police investigators perceived their role as moderators as one which gives advice on how to use ‘soft’ words to announce their intention of calling for actions, and not as law enforcers that take strict measures against them (e.g. shutting down the websites). As Yu Tingting, one of the key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN), commented:

‘I once encouraged our site readers to join with us and to protest against women’s rights together, and then I was invited to the police station to “have a cup of tea”. [...] To my surprise, the investigators thought what I had advocated for was a good thing, but they still needed to warn me that I touched on such “sensitive” words as “female sexuality” and “rights”. They also suggested that I could often communicate with them via telephone to have a clearer sense of what “sensitive” words I should avoid using. They said that they were glad to give me reliable guidance and they supported my work.’

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<sup>19</sup> Guo Jianmei was the founder of Woman-Legal Aid (WLA), which was one example of the ‘civic associations’ category based in Beijing.

<sup>20</sup> These four interviewees were: Guo Jianmei – the founder of Woman-Legal Aid (WLA); Chen Yaya and Yu Tingting – key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN); and Ke Qianting – the core organiser of Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU).

This was also evident in the interview with Guo Jianmei – the founder of Woman-Legal Aid (WLA) – who said that even though the Internet police had hacked her personal and work phones and computers, they still agreed that the WLA work played a significant role in the advancement of women (Group Interview, 23 March 2012). Similarly, another interviewee, Ke Qianting, who was the core organiser of the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU), said that although she sometimes received warnings from the Internet police, they did not force her to delete those messages relating to mobilisation activities after they noted down what they were (Personal Interview, 11 April 2012).

This might be a possible reason that most of the examined women's groups in my study adopted a 'non-disruptive' form (Yang, 2009b) of 'offline activities' to call for individual participation. In this respect, it should be noted that 'government agencies' did not include this feature on their websites. As discussed already, this was possibly due to their top-down and institutionalised nature, which made them serve as a mouthpiece for the government and to publicise their own achievements. Features analysis found that eight 'civic associations', two 'university-based centres', and one 'online community' provided concrete information on their organised activities, including workshops, community service, lectures, master classes, and training. In addition, a few groups invited interested site visitors to submit their artistic works and published them online with the author's permission. For instance, in January 2013, the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N) ran a contest that focused on the topic of 'domestic violence' by encouraging participants to contribute their photographs, drawings, paintings, or self-produced videos to the group. The photograph in Figure 7.3 serves as an illustrative example.

It is thus characteristic that the websites of the studied women's groups were mainly used to mobilise individual supporters to participate in conservative forms of offline actions, taking into consideration online censorship. However, this did not rule out the possibility that participants might have been able to voice radical or alternative opinions when taking part in these 'offline activities' organised by the groups.

*Figure 7.3 A photograph centred on the theme of ‘anti-domestic violence’*



**Note.** Retrieved from the website of the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N)

This is because, as a public space, these websites were under constant surveillance, which in turn discouraged women’s groups from calling for radical protests or dissent. In contrast, the people participating offline could freely express their views as the physical meeting places were not accessible to the public. In this respect, Lv Pin, the core organiser of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and Gender Watch Women’s Voice (GWWV), referred to the fact that often, participants provoked fierce debate about feminist rights or sexual rights of women in those ‘offline activities’ that had been advertised through the group’s website (Personal Interview, 13 March 2012).

Even still, features analysis found that three ‘civic associations’ (Anti-Domestic Violence Network [ADV N]; Gender Watch Women’s Voice [GWWV]; Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]) adopted the tactic of ‘e-petitions’ to pressure the National People’s Congress (NPC) to legitimate the law of anti-domestic violence in China. Yet, these online petitions were presented only for a couple of days, and no data was available about the successes of these attempts. In reality, the law on domestic violence took effect in China on March 1, 2016. This was mainly due to the mounting pressure from

lobbyists and activists, such as Feng Yuan (the founding organiser of the ADVN), who signed the ‘e-petitions’. As a consequence, the government decided to implement the law on domestic violence. In addition, these ‘civic associations’ have successfully brought public attention to an issue that had previously been treated as a private and family matter.

At the same time, based on interviews with staff members, several groups sometimes tried to organise flash mobs taking place in physical space, while Web platforms played a supportive role as they were spaces for reporting these activities and for directly communicating with the public. This was particularly the case for the Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU). In the interview with their core organiser, Ke Qianting, she recalled a campaign to fight against plastic surgery in April 2010, as well as the way in which a flash mob of university students put on a performance at tube stations (Personal Interview, 11 April 2012). After the campaign, she let the student participants write up a photo news piece and upload this material online, as well as encouraged them to reply to visitor comments.

However, in the mind of some staff members, this form of ephemeral campaigning could not be regarded as collective action, because they believed that it was just a small group of people who staged street demonstrations, not a collective to contribute to a long-lasting movement. For instance, as Lv Pin, the co-organiser of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder of Gender Watch Women’s Voice (GWWV), in this regard, noted:

‘Still, these actions are limited, scattered, and isolated. [...] In China, these are too few to be counted, and they are not sufficient enough to form a collective. Us, as well as our organised actions, are very weak in public space, with low visibility. People can’t hear our voice...’

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012)

Chen Yaya, the administrator of Online Feminism in China (FCN), concurred: ‘It looks like a small number of activists who rely on “performance art” to petition for more public attention on women’s issues instead of demanding collective action’ (Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

Moreover, many of my interviewees maintained that lobbying was crucial for facilitating changes in the structural constraints on women's status. In other words, regulatory reform was an essential precondition for the success of women's collective action. In this respect, features analysis found that some women's groups, especially 'civic associations', considered their websites a public space to broadcast their efforts involved in the processes of supporting legal change. One of the key actors in this respect was the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N), who had the ultimate goal of rendering into force laws that fight domestic violence. In an interview, the ADV N founder Feng Yuan described how she felt about the importance of websites in diffusing information about their lobbying activities: 'This is indeed an efficient way to make our voice heard by legislative bodies' (Personal Interview, 21 March 2012). Yet, it is worth bearing in mind that websites still serve as a supplementary tool to disseminating information of a group's lobbying activities in the offline world. As Feng Yuan added: 'We have used the website to assist our work [in lobbying] throughout' (Personal Interview, 21 March 2012).

## **7.5 Developing Inter-Organisational Relations: Online and Offline**

The above discussion shows how the studied women's groups, *individually*, used the Internet in the processes of enhancing women's empowerment in China, focusing on three aspects, namely informing practices, a sense of the collective, and political campaigns. Aside from this individualistic vantage point, the Internet also provides greater ease in creating connections among organisations to fight for a common cause (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011; Bennett & Segerberg, 2011; Diani, 2000; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Kavada, 2005, 2011; Pudrovska & Ferree, 2004; Stein, 2009). Based on interviews with staff members and social network analysis, this section will turn to examining the processes through which women's groups came, or did not come to work together, and the role of the Internet in these processes.

### **7.5.1 Face-to-Face Communication and Inter-Organisational Alliances**

In my interviews with staff members from different organisational types of women's groups, no one mentioned that the Internet was essential for alliance-building, but most of them stressed the importance of face-to-face contact in this regard. Although

no one explicitly talked about why there was not greater use of the Internet in building inter-organisational coalitions, it is highly probable that, at least, some women's groups did not consider online networking a *concrete* form of collaboration. As Chen Yaya, the administrator of Online Feminism in China (FCN), remarked:

'For me, it is very difficult to believe that building alliances through the Internet can have real effects. Such so-called online collaborative practices as hyperlinking and cross-posting are not real, although we, as well as other women's groups, have used the websites to do these things.'

(Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012)

However, it is worth noting here that hyperlinks and cross-postings are still two important indicators that help us understand how women's groups use the Internet to form online relationships. I will discuss this point in more detail in a later section.

Yet, when asked about offline relationships between their group and others, in the first instance many of my interviewees from '*civic associations*' drew clear boundaries between themselves and 'government agencies'. They believed that, despite fighting for a common cause, the nature of 'GONGOS' (government-organised non-governmental organisations) was a major barrier against equal cooperation between these two types of group actors. As Lv Pin, the co-organiser of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder of Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), commented:

'The All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) generally does not cooperate with women's NGOs in China, as the ACWF does not acknowledge that women's NGOs play a role that is parallel to them. Although the ACWF sometimes invite me or staff members from other NGOs to work with them, we can only represent ourselves rather than the group we affiliate with. That said, the ACWF "filters" our organisational identities, even though our points of view come from our groups. On other occasions, the ACWF claims their role is as a "consultant" to a few women's NGOs, like Rural Women (RW) and the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV). But in reality, the ACWF is not a "consultant"; instead, they are a quasi-superior body to RW and ADVN...'

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012)

In replying to why their groups had a cooperative relationship with the ACWF, interview respondents from the ADVN and RW pointed out that they needed to take China's political environment into account. Yet, they expressed opposing attitudes towards this issue. For the ADVN, it seems that they had no alternative but to work with the ACWF if they wanted to pursue the group's aim. As Liu Xiaojuan, the ADVN programme coordinator, put it:

'In China, if we want to survive or to further our work, we must maintain a friendly and cooperative relationship with the ACWF. I think that this strategy is very helpful in promoting our points of view to the public, and it is very safe. So to guarantee our long-lasting work, we treat the ACWF as a good partner and a supportive entity.'

(Liu Xiaojuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012)

Conversely, Xie Lihua, the founder of RW, stressed the necessity for women's NGOs and the ACWF to work together in order to change the patriarchal system, as, in her mind, the ACWF's access to national decision-makers could make the voice of women's NGOs heard by the government (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). In the words of Xie Lihua: 'Only the combination of two sides [the ACWF and women's NGOs] could create a unique model that promotes the development of women's movements with Chinese features' (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). In addition, the RW group at times received a small amount of funding from the ACWF (although not in an official manner) because Xie Lihua used to work as a chief editor of *China Women's News* – a national newspaper set up by the ACWF (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). This indicates that a certain degree of trust has been established between RW and the ACWF, largely due to Xie Lihua's pre-existing relationship with the ACWF.

At the same time, interviewees from '**government agencies**' asserted that, gradually, China's Communist Party (CCP) had realised the importance of 'civic associations' in supporting governmental work. As one long-term member of the ACWF noted:

'Now China's one national strategy is to "connect with the international track". Against this backdrop, the government has recognised that their work should not be about order and administration any more. Instead, they need to provide a service to people. Service

and administration are two different notions: the former is about provision, while the latter restriction. This in turn provides a tolerant atmosphere for the development of women's NGOs.'

(Dong Lin, Group Interview, 20 February 2012)

The anonymous interviewee from the Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC) also stressed that the ACWF often proposed to unite women's 'civic associations' and to communicate with them (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). However, some staff members of 'civic associations' were sceptical about government's changing attitudes, suggesting that they were more like a public relations exercise. In one such case, Xin Lihua, the founder of Rural Women (RW), commented:

'For the time being, the government still maintains a tight grip on women's NGOs by imposing regulatory restrictions upon us. For instance, written in legal regulations, the ACWF clearly defines their role as "a hub" to connect all women's NGOs. Yet, the fact remains that they just have such a proposal without any specific measures. [...] That said, it sounds like the ACWF makes empty promises.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

This concurred with Lin Lixia, the key organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC), who said that, in reality, regardless of the government's attempts at public relations exercise, they still played a role in controlling women's NGOs rather than collaborating with them (Personal Interview, 23 March 2012).

In addition, it is interesting to note that while many of my interviewees from '*civic associations*' agreed with the importance of face-to-face communication for a close relationship with other groups, there was disagreement as to whether or not offline 'working together' could facilitate *strong* inter-organisational alliances. In this respect, it was different perceptions of the concept of 'working together' that seemed to divide these interviewees. Some saw the issue as a need for 'civic associations' to cooperate in the running of mutual projects. For instance, as Gao Yucong, both the website coordinator and the public relations officer of The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC), remarked: 'My personal feeling is that we [women's NGOs] are not united. [...] We have not made joint efforts to undertake projects



altogether' (Personal Interview, 19 March 2012). Xie Lihua, the founder of Rural Women (RW) concurred with this perspective, referring to an early attempt:

'It had been the original intention that we [women's NGOs] would cooperate with each other through carrying out specific projects, like tackling issues of land property in rural areas, fighting domestic violence, and fighting sexual abuse. However, given different reasons, we did not make that come true.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

When asked about why 'civic associations' failed to cultivate a close collaboration with each other, Gao Yucong continued to reflect as such:

'Maybe it is the group's aims; each group has its own priorities. For instance, Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV) places a focus on media monitoring; Woman-Legal Aid (WLA) on the protection of women's rights; and my group on women's psychological problems. Perhaps we all think we need to first finish our work – which is a heavy workload for us. This in turn means that we don't have time to work on cooperative projects.'

(Gao Yucong, Personal Interview, 19 March 2012)

As well as different organisational objectives and a lack of time, another factor that hindered 'civic associations' from working together may have resulted from who would play the role as a decision-maker in this process. As Xie Lihua questioned:

'How could we reorganise the different organisational objectives among women's NGOs? Which group will take charge of this responsibility? Women's NGOs all have a strong sense of equality. So who will lead this process? In fact, no one is willing to do so... This might explain why there is an absence of inter-organisational alliances.'

(Xie Lihua, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012)

Interviewees from Online Feminism in China (FCN) – although an outsider to 'civic associations' in my study – also noticed this problem, i.e. a lack of solidarity among women's *non-governmental* groups (Chen Yaya, Personal Interview, 2 March 2012; Yu Tingting, 3 March 2012).

In contrast, other interviewees of ‘civic associations’ believed that any form of face-to-face contact, which often simply involved the co-attendance of a symposium or co-participation in cultural events organised by a certain group, was important for solidarity among women’s groups. For example, in replying to what type of relationship the women’s ‘civic association’ had created in physical space, Lin Lixia, the key organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC), noted:

‘We support each other and we grasp every opportunity to work together. For instance, we sometimes co-organised forum meetings and cultural activities with The Maple Women’s Psychological Counselling Centre (MWPPC). In addition, we worked with the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN) on some specific projects fighting domestic violence. This is also the case for Rural Women (RW): they often invite us to participate in their physical meetings, and vice versa. Generally, we [women’s NGOs] want any chance to establish social contact, like sitting together to discuss new policies relating to women. Sometimes, my group helped other women’s NGOs to amend their legal documents.’

(Lin Lixia, Personal Interview, 23 March 2012)

Lv Pin, the co-organiser of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder of Gender Watch Women’s Voice (GWWV), concurred:

‘We have various forms of cooperation, as there are not many women’s NGOs in China – indeed very few. We are a small circle and we know each other. We often work in loose coalitions, which are informal and flexible. We don’t have an official agreement to establish a regular pattern of “working together”.’

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012)

What the above quote further demonstrated was that pre-existing relationships played a role in forming ‘a small circle’. For example, Gao Yucong, both the public relations officer and the website coordinator of the MWPPC, also commented on the fact that all women’s NGOs had a good relationship with one another (Personal Interview, 19 March 2012). At this point, it is important to note that the ‘small circle’ referred to those ‘civic associations’ located in the same city (Beijing), suggesting that

geographical proximity was another essential aspect in the establishment of relationships at an inter-organisational level.

On the other hand, physical distance imposed restrictions on the development of a close collaboration among women's groups located in different geographical places. This was evident when Xie Lihua, the founder of Rural Women (RW), remarked: 'For women's groups [non-governmental groups], different geographical locations mean a high cost' (Personal Interview, 14 March 2012). Quite a similar response was elicited in the reply from Yu Tingting, one of the key moderators of Online Feminism in China (FCN): 'Women's [non-governmental] groups have limited opportunities to communicate with each other. [...] This is more the result of different geographical locations' (Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). In addition, Ke Qianting, one of the core organisers of Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU), stressed the fact that they had a very close relationship with grassroots groups located in Guangdong (Personal Interview, 11 April 2012).

Even still, for some of my interviewees, the Internet is an ideal choice for the establishment of inter-organisational relationships, as it tends to provide a more cost-effective way to facilitate communication among women's groups. In this respect, Yu Tingting noted that 'although there is an absence of communication platform for women's groups [in different locations] to make social contact; for me, the Internet is the best option' (Personal Interview, 3 March 2012). In what follows, I will report on whether or not the examined women's groups used the Internet, while not their primary method, to develop a form of inter-organisational alliances.

### **7.5.2 Inter-Organisational Alliances on the Web**

As mentioned already, the evidence from my interviews showed that the examined women's groups fell short of building inter-organisational alliances using the Internet; instead, they heavily relied on face-to-face communication in this regard. Nonetheless, the data on social network analysis revealed a different picture – that is, that hyperlinks provided new opportunities for women's groups to connect with each other and to form an information sharing circle among themselves.

### **7.5.2.1 Hyperlinks for a Public Display of Connections**

Figure 7.4 shows the hyperlink network map of my sampled women's groups, drawn using NodeXL (see Methodology Chapter) – a tool designed to explore network graphs. On initial inspection, all groups – be they from 'government agencies', 'civic associations', 'university-based centres', or 'online communities' – were directly or indirectly connected with each other, suggesting that they formed a virtual network. On the other hand, this indicates that there was a clear distinction between the online practice of hyperlinking and the real situation on the ground. Based on the above discussion, in social reality, the conflict between governmental group actors and non-governmental group actors really exists. Yet, when it comes to cyberspace, it looks as though every group actor had a good relationship with each other, which could be seen as a strategy to present their public connections. In this respect, I argue that the networks formed online are an illusion, as we cannot identify actual practices behind the hyperlinks.

In this network, the Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADV N) received greatest recognition from other groups as they had the highest number of incoming links. This is partly due to the rich resources stored on the site, which could be easily referred to by others (Feng Yuan, Personal Interview, 21 March 2012). As the 'most linked' women's group, Gender and Development in China (GAD) also turned out to be a core actor within the network. This might be because of the nature of the GAD site, which was an informational portal serving all women's groups (Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012).

Importantly, 'civic associations' formed a tightly knit sub-network, as nearly half of group actors contained reciprocated ties. This concurred with the 'small circle' that has emerged in the real world, as expressed by some of my interviewees from 'civic associations' (see Section 7.5.1). However, some of my interviewees from 'civic associations' questioned the use of hyperlinks in this regard, suggesting that this strategy did not produce any concrete social influence. In this respect, Lin Lixia, the core organiser of Women Watch in China (WWC), noted that 'we have formed "a small circle", but we are peripheral to mainstream discourse. Our voice is only from this "inner ring", only enjoyed by ourselves' (Personal Interview, 23 March 2012). Lv Pin, the co-organiser of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder

of Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), concurred with this perspective, reflecting on the weak voice of this 'tightly knit sub-network':

'Women's NGOs in China are very weak, we are very few and with very little power. We are also not very active. In China, there are a lot of online public debates, but how many voices are expressed by women's groups? The answer is NONE! Women's groups, on the one hand, are marginalised, but on the other, they are self-marginalised. I say we are **marginalised** because the mainstream debates are not interested in our ideas. For most people in China, our ideas are trivial. I say **self-marginalised** because women's groups do not participate in public life using their own initiative; we do not hold critical views on gender inequality in society. Thus, it is not surprising that the public does not know either who we are or what we are doing.'

(Lv Pin, Personal Interview, 13 March 2012; emphasis added)

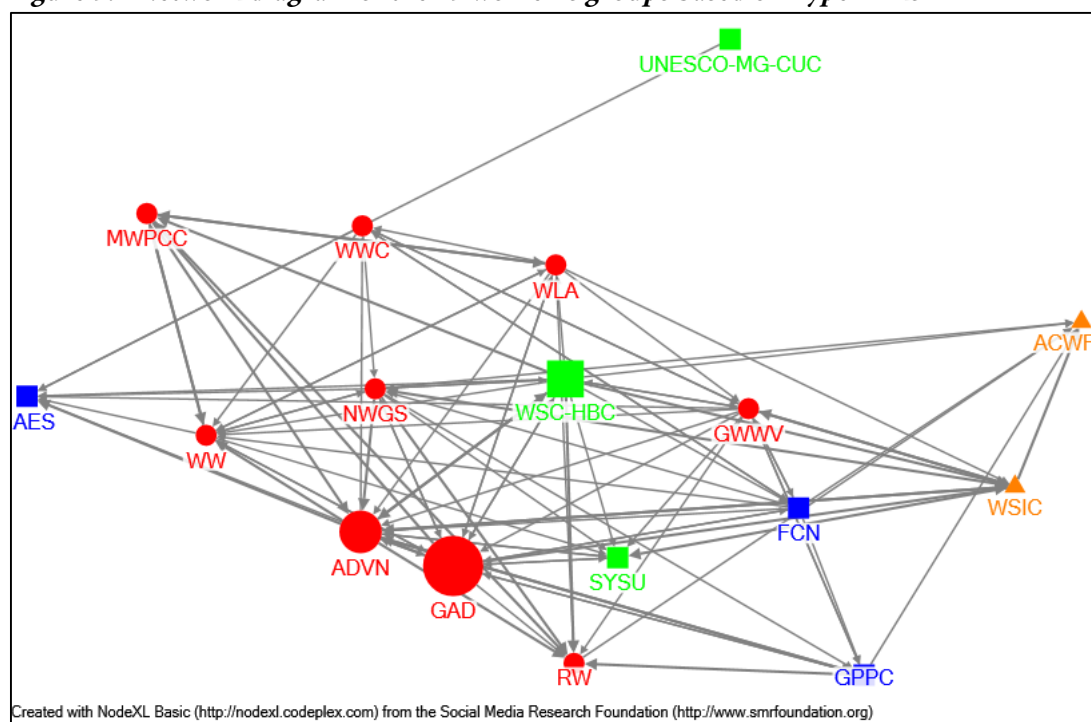
Hence, this is the harsh reality that women's 'civic associations' need to cope with within the context of China. Even the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) are situated in an isolated position within the institutional system. Thus, despite the fact that women's groups can hyperlink with each other, these hyperlinks do not help them to develop a collective voice in the real world.

Furthermore, a closer look revealed that the majority of women's groups holding a central position within the network were 'civic associations', whereas 'government agencies' were located at the periphery. In particular, apart from Rural Women (RW), no one else among 'civic associations' built online connections with the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF), which, as discussed in the previous section, was reflective of their conflicting relationship in the real world. It is also important to note that the link between RW and the ACWF is possibly due to Xie Lihua's special affinity with the ACWF, as she used to work within the ACWF system and currently leads RW (see Section 7.5.1).

By contrast, more than half of the 'civic associations' established links to the Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC). This also became evident in the interviews. As Lv Pin, the co-organisator of Gender and Development in China (GAD) and the founder of Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV), remarked, 'Compared with the ACWF, women's NGOs have a relatively equal relationship with the WSIC,

but nevertheless they are a branch of the ACWF' (Personal Interview, 13 March 2012). This might further explain why the WSIC dropped out of the dominant cluster of 'civic associations' in the network, as, in nature, it was still a government agency.

**Figure 7.4** Network diagram of the 17 women's groups based on hyperlinks



**Note.** The colour of the nodes reflects organisational types: 1) orange triangle – government agencies, 2) pink circle – civic associations, 3) green diamond – university-based centres, and 4) blue square – online communities. The relatively larger sizes of the nodes correspond to their having a larger number of links.

Meanwhile, two 'university-based centres' (Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University [SGEF-SYSU]; Women's Study Centre at Hunan Business College [WSC-HBC]) and one 'online community' (Online Feminism in China [FCN]) appeared near the centre of the network. In this respect, although the WSC-HBC held a good position in the network, no data from my interviews showed that this group played a leading role in real-world inter-organisational alliances. In fact, as noted above, no group had expressed a strong desire to unite all fellow members to fight for the equal rights of women. The reason that the WSC-HBC holds a more central location was because this group tried to become a 'connector' within the network, producing the highest number of outgoing links.

Conversely, the near central position of the SGEF-SYSU reflected the group's real social contact with 'civic associations', especially with GAD and GWWV. As Ke Qianting, one of the core organisers of SGEF-SYSU, explained:

'We have frequent social contact with women's groups located in Beijing, such as GAD and GWWV. These two groups often report on our group's activities and publish them on their websites. In addition, if we need some documents or training resources, they send them to us via email. We have good communication on these aspects.'

(Ke Qianting, Personal Interview, 11 April 2012)

In this respect, the Internet helped some to escape the limits of geographical distance often impeding face-to-face communication. As mentioned earlier, on many occasions, the SGEF-SYSU maintained a close relationship with grassroots groups in Guangdong. In addition, the connection with the core actor GAD might explain why the SGEF-SYSU was located in a more central position within the network.

Finally, in my interviews with the FCN key moderators, although stressing that building hyperlinks was just a new way of indicating, publicly, their connections with other women's groups, they believed that this might serve as the best option to enhance their visibility within the network. Hence, it is no surprise that the FCN created connections with nearly every member of the dominant cluster of 'civic associations' within the network.

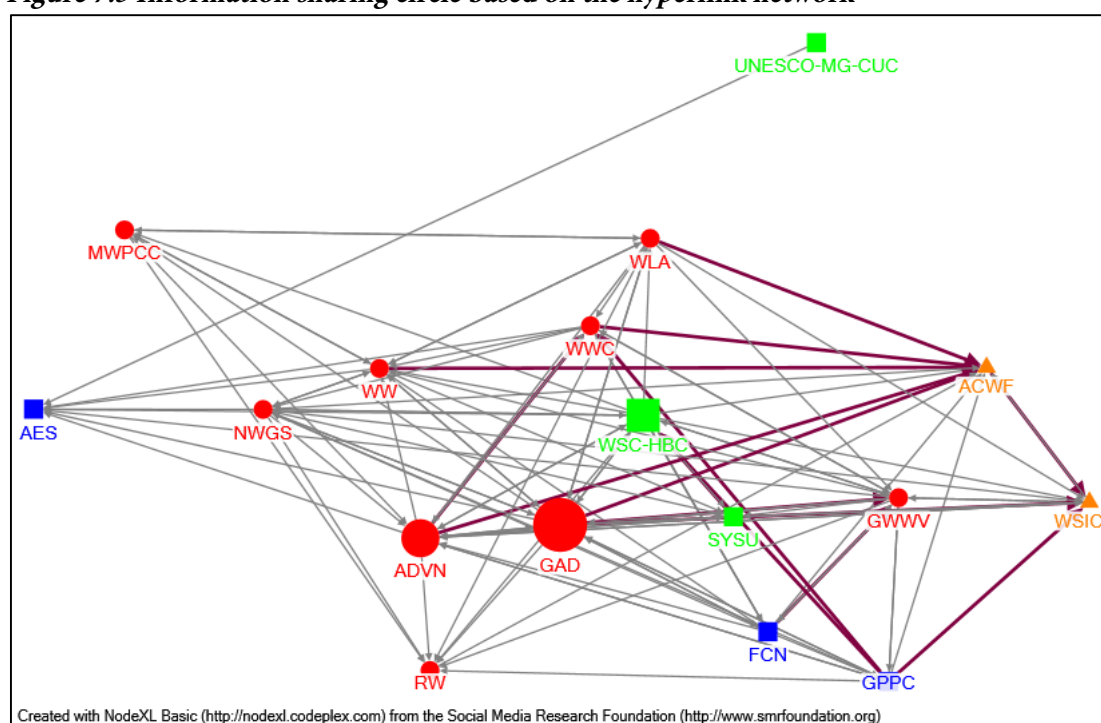
#### **7.5.2.2 Facilitating the Process of Information Sharing through Cross-Postings**

Hyperlinks also played a role in sharing information among group members within the virtual network. This was inspired by the quote, cited earlier, given by Chen Yaya, the administrator of Online Feminism in China (FCN; see Section 7.5.1). In terms of the question of online networking, she continued to comment on the fact that the only way the FCN used their website to promote collaborative practices with other women's groups was through 're-posting' (Personal Interview, 2 March 2012).

Following this logic, I conducted further hyperlink analysis by focusing on the section of 'news articles and reports' on each website of my sampled women's groups. The results showed that the Internet offered an opportunity for some groups to form

a knowledge community through the act of cross-posting (see Figure 7.5; the purple edges represent information-sharing connections). To my surprise, ‘government agencies’ (All-China Women’s Federation [ACWF]; Chinese Women’s Research Network [WSIC]) played a central role in the process of sharing information, as their own articles and reports were shared by seven ‘civic associations’, one ‘university-based centre’, and one ‘online community’. This might be because both the ACWF and WSIC have advantageous resources associated with skilled long-term staff members who help to produce accurate and valuable information on women’s issues (Anonymous, Personal Interview, 14 March 2012).

**Figure 7.5** Information sharing circle based on the hyperlink network



**Note.** The purple edges correspond to hyperlinks to groups whose original articles were reposted by fellow members.

Therefore, the processes of developing inter-organisational relationships were mainly undertaken face-to-face while hyperlinks played a supportive role as they served as either a public tool to display connections or a cost-efficient means to share information. In addition, many women’s groups held the belief that the networks based on hyperlinks were virtual and would not cause concrete impacts in physical world. As such, there were clear boundaries between online and offline realms in this regard.



## **Chapter 8 Discussion: Does the Internet Empower Women in the Context of China?**

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In this discussion, I will firstly give the context of my PhD study, as well as the possible contributions it makes to existing scholarship. I then discuss the main findings of my study and synthesise these to answer the proposed research questions, which will allow me to generate a holistic picture of the relationship between women's empowerment and the Internet in the context of China. I will finish this chapter by discussing the limitations of my thesis and by making suggestions for further research.

### **8.1 Why the Internet, Women's Empowerment, and China?**

This study is centred on the question of whether or not the Internet empowers Chinese women. More specifically, it has sought to explore the role of the Internet in the processes through which women actors – be they individual or a collective – develop their capacity to exercise power to challenge male-dominated structures in a Chinese context. As discussed in Chapter 4, Chinese women had long been confined within a patriarchal framework in which they needed to follow traditional femininity norms and to fulfil their responsibilities for looking after husbands, bearing and rearing children (especially sons), and maintaining family relations.

Although the China's Communist Party (CCP), after the foundation of People's Republic of China (1949), worked towards the liberation of Chinese women, their efforts indeed served as a political strategy to ensure national development. In this way, Chinese women were not treated as individual actors with agency but as part of the national labour force (Evans, 2008; Leung, 2003; F. Liu, 2014; Schaffer & Song, 2007; Wallis, 2006). This is particularly evident in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), in which Chinese women were obligated to make an economic contribution to the nation by making personal sacrifices for the collective. Even after entering the reform years in the 1980s and 1990s, while the then-pioneer female intellectuals advocated 'searching for the self' (Xu, 2009), Chinese women overall were categorised as a weak social group, as the CCP put great emphasis on essentialist gender differences. As such, women in China were placed into a disadvantage position in the field of employment, and many of them returned home and re-took their family responsibilities.

As can be seen, in the cultural and historical contexts of China, the role of Chinese women has been inextricably intertwined with the patriarchal norms and state intervention, and even in the present day, such a situation still exists. Worse yet, against the backdrop of a 'postmillennial consumerist modernity' (Evans, 2008, p.361), the body of Chinese women, moreover, was at risk of sexually consumed (see also Wallis, 2015). In addition, in a broader sense, although the CCP has rhetorically promoted 'equality between men and women' as a state policy, women, in practice, do not have the same rights as men to personal choice, education, employment, and political participation.

Hence, patriarchy is never absent from Chinese society; on the contrary, it has been reproduced and developed into new forms under the influence of the CCP's ideology, the resurgence of traditional gender norms, and the pervasiveness of consumerism. Within such contexts, there are 'limits of gender' (Evans, 2008) in China; that is, Chinese women now are located at the intersections of structural political inequalities, discursive and cultural rootedness of femininity norms, and China's integration with the economic globalisation.

As such, this study has extended this discussion to the realm of the Internet, as the capacity of the Internet for women's advancement has been a fiercely contested issue in the existing feminist literature, including the cyberfeminist theory (e.g. Gajjala, 1999, 1999-2000; Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 1999; Haraway, 1985/1991; Munster, 1999; Plant, 1996, 1997; Wilding, 1998a, 1998b; Youngs, 2004), the mutual shaping approach of gender and technology (e.g. van Zoonen, 2002; Wajcman, 2000, 2004, 2010), and the stance on lifestyle politics (e.g. Harris, 2008; Hasinoff, 2014; Levina, 2014; Mann, 2014; Portwood-Stacer, 2014; Shaw, 2014). In particular, Gajjala and Youngs explicitly pointed out that the Internet could play a role in the process of women's empowerment. Here, by focusing on Chinese female bloggers and women's groups, this study reworked the notion of empowerment – which has currently become a 'buzzword' used more often in a quantitative approach as a goal to achieve or an outcome to measure. In this respect, my PhD project remains quite distinctive in its treatment of women's empowerment as a theoretical concept and in its exploration of the role of the Internet in this conceptualisation.

Thus, my research also has the potential to enrich theory on the subject. Inspired by Papa et al. (2000), I have proposed a communication approach to theorising about women's empowerment by drawing from feminist work and relevant ideas across sociology underpinning empowerment. To this end, the feminist Allen's (1998, 2005, 2008) theoretical discussion of *power* serves as a particularly useful starting point in setting the scene for a clear theorisation of empowerment, as power is the root-concept of empowerment. Her work can be seen as a synthesis of key feminist ideas that underpin the concept of *power*. Power is thereby understood as a dynamic process that involves the development of women's capacities to exercise '*power to*' and '*power with*' in order to make significant changes to the way in which men exert '*power over*' women. These three power dimensions – '*power to*', '*power with*', and '*power over*' – are not isolated from each other; rather, they need to be seen as the co-product of the questioning of and reaction against patriarchal structure by women.

Based on this reformulation of feminist conceptions of power, there is also a strong sense that women's empowerment indeed entails a process of change that places communication in a central position (see Papa et al., 2000). To better explain the communicative aspects of this process, I locate women's empowerment within a broader framework to unpack how women develop a set of communicative practices to provide themselves with agency. In so doing, I focus on the ways in which women actors recognise their subordinate status (see Kabeer, 2010; Lindsey, 2015), raise consciousness (see Carr, 2003; Gutiérrez, 1990, 1994; Shields, 1995; Zimmerman, 1995), express their viewpoints (see Ganesh & Zoller, 2012; Giddens, 1991; Plummer, 2001; Rappaport, 1995), interact with the society (see Bartky, 1998; Butler, 1990; Deveaux, 1994; Foucault, 1978, 1979, 1980; Goffman, 1959), and organise collective action (see Pelak et al., 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1994) to bring about both personal and social change.

I then turn to the field of media, communication, and technology studies to generate a more thorough conceptualisation of the relationship between the Internet and women's empowerment, an area that is rather scarce in the current literature on the subject. At this point, the previously proposed communicative character of women's empowerment becomes more salient, as in the context of this study, the Internet is viewed as a broader communication phenomenon that reinforces the

development of communicative practices (see Gitelman, 2006; Lievrouw, 2009, 2011, 2012; Lievrouw & Livingstone, 2006b). In this respect, I particularly look at the role of the Internet in the processes of consciousness-raising (see Couldry, 2008; Lambert, 2013; Lundby, 2008b), identity projection (see Papacharissi, 2011b; van Dijck, 2013a; van Dijck, 2013b), personal social networks (see Castells, 2009/2013; Rainie & Wellman, 2012; Wellman, 2001), and organising collective action (see Bimber et al., 2012; Flanagin et al., 2006; Kavada, 2011, 2014, 2015). This then helps us to rethink key notions in the outlined conceptual framework for women's empowerment, as well as allows their communicative character to come to the fore. At this point, my theoretical framework can be seen as a valuable contribution to building a dialogue between research on women's empowerment and Internet studies.

From the vantage point of female bloggers, past studies have viewed weblogs as public platforms to present gendered identities (e.g. Herring et al., 2005; Kitzmann, 2004; Lövheim, 2011, 2013b; van Doorn et al., 2007; Willett, 2008), as an open space to perform femininity and sexuality (e.g. Antunovic & Hardin, 2013; Attwood, 2009; Bortree, 2005; Muise, 2011), or as an opportunity to participate in lifestyle politics (e.g. Farrer, 2007; Harris, 2008; Keller, 2012; Sinanan et al., 2014; A. Taylor, 2011). In my study, apart from demonstrating the ways in which weblogs are involved in these different practices, I have further connected them with the concept of empowerment and explored whether this leads women to take actions to bring about personal change. In the current literature, one of the most recent studies exploring the relationship between weblogs and the rise of women's empowerment was conducted by Stavrositu and Sundar (2012), in which the authors use quantitative methods and build models to test whether blogs give rise to psychological empowerment among women. However, my study has adopted a qualitative approach to conceptualising the role of weblogs in women's empowerment, and has not drawn clear boundaries among different facets that underpin the subject.

From the vantage point of women's groups, although previous studies agree that research on women's empowerment can draw insights from collective action theory, they have not mapped out how the empowerment process unfolds in feminist movements (Deveaux, 1994; Jönsson, 2010; Papa et al., 2000; White, 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1994). Clearly, I have managed to show that collective action theory can help us

to develop a thorough understanding of women's empowerment and its role in effecting social structures. In particular, I have placed women's organisations in a more central place to illustrate the ways in which they do, or do not attempt to persuade participants to join in, negotiate with them, construct common issues, and collaborate with allies to exercise collective power. In addition, my research has demonstrated the value of incorporating the Internet alongside its afforded communicative affordances into this process. In this respect, my research can contribute to addressing the gap in this field of enquiry, as it is currently missing a clear theorisation of the role of mediated communication within the process of women's empowerment.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the key position I hold in this study: the Internet provides potential, opportunity, and new practices for women, but it falls short of determining the emergence of women's empowerment. We should keep in mind that, in China, the possibilities offered for social change by women's leveraging of specific communicative affordances of the Internet are situated within contextual conditions of authoritative control, consumerism and commercialism, as well as shaped by a system-wide patriarchal culture. In this respect, it is also important to note that exploring the relationship between women's empowerment and the Internet has generated a complex picture, rich in detail, and at times difficult to capture in its entirety.

## **8.2 Role of the Internet in the Development of Chinese Women's Empowerment**

Therefore, focusing on Chinese female bloggers and women's groups of different organisational types, my research examines how these two kinds of women actors have used weblogs and websites, respectively, to generate a sense of empowerment. At the same time, the main focus of this study is to discuss the following questions:

**Main Question:** What is the role of the Internet in women's empowerment in China?

**RQ1:** What is the role of women's blogs in the process of women's empowerment in China?

- How do female bloggers use their weblogs in the process of performing their identity, connecting with others and developing their interpersonal networks, as well as expressing themselves about the issues that concern them?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of blogs in this process?

**RQ2:** How do women's groups use websites to empower women in China?

- What is the role of websites in the process of informing, building a sense of the collective, as well as campaigning, and networking with peer organisations?
- What are the limitations and constraints in the use of websites in this process?

Here, it is also important to stress that this study has selected two specific Web platforms (i.e. weblogs and websites) among various applications, services, and technologies in order to investigate the potential and constraints of the Internet in the process of women's empowerment. This restricted focus was inspired by the development of the Chinese Internet when I started my PhD project in 2010. According to the China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC), it is only since 2009 that the population of female bloggers in China is higher than that of male bloggers. Meanwhile, previous empirical research has shown that websites were then the first choice for women's groups to establish their Web presence, at a time when Chinese social media was in its infancy (T. Liu, 2008; Yang, 2007, 2009b).

### **8.2.1 The Internet and the Rise in Self-Empowerment of Chinese Women**

To answer the first research question, I adopted a multi-methods approach to focus on four types of women's blogs: Sina Blog Eladies (SBE; n=88), activist women (n=2), a pioneer (n=1), and the Green-Red Group (n=4). The empirical data used is derived from features analysis of these selected female blogs, social network analysis of the relationships between these blogs, and from in-depth interviews with seven female bloggers. This data is complimented by discourse analysis to investigate the communicative purposes of these blogs, and content analysis of selected written comments on these blogs.

The overall impression across these women bloggers is that they are urban users, have received formal education, and possess relatively high socio-economic status in

Chinese society. Some of them are professional writers, while a majority are amateur ones. Thus, at first glance, these bloggers seem to have the capacity to voice their opinion. Yet, the most important finding of the present study suggests that the sense of empowerment that the selected women experienced through the use of weblogs is limited by patriarchal rules, discursive constraints, state control, and commercialism. In some cases, this empowerment afforded by the blogs is indeed an *illusion*, not a real empowering.

Firstly, as emerges from the empirical results, although self-expression was the primary benefit that the selected female bloggers obtained from the practice of online writing, they did not use this communicative practice either to develop a sense of awareness about the existing set of power arrangements, or to reflect on their subordinate status. This result is in sharp contrast with Stravrositu and Sundar's (2012) research in which they found that women blogger could have a deep sense of empowerment through the practice of self-expression. Indeed, what underlay the studied bloggers' posted content was the reinforcement of the norms of a Chinese binary gender system. Van Doorn et al.'s (2008) discussion of online embodiment is particularly useful in understanding this, as their stance is that the Internet does not facilitate the re-conceptualisation of gender, but is a realm where people bring their everyday experiences to constitute a temporal reality.

Based on my results, it is true to say that weblogs opened up new avenues for female authors to make their voice heard by exposing their personal beliefs, values, and ideas on a plurality of topics, such as 'style', 'personal experiences', and 'love, marriage, and sexual relationships'. However, these topics could simply signal that weblogs helped to blur the boundaries between private and public life (Mann, 2014; Youngs, 2004) among these female authors, but does not develop their own standpoints in reaction to unequal power relations and stereotypical roles of gender. In this respect, while some feminist scholars' argued that self-expression could have led to empowerment by making personal issues political (Harris, 2008), this was not necessarily the case here. In addition, unlike the earlier cyberfeminist assumption that the Internet could serve as a space to experiment with gender (Danet, 1998; Turkle, 1995), here, the studied women authors used their blogs to reflect on their own lives.

This is particularly the case for the *SBE* bloggers and members of the *Green-Red Group* who often used their blogs to write ‘personal journal’ posts. Apart from mostly documenting their everyday lives, these female bloggers strictly followed patriarchal standards of femininity and tried to meet social expectations attached to them. They still firmly believed that marriage, family, and gendered morals were major determinants of a Chinese woman’s life trajectory. Such findings concur with the earlier feminist research that although women had been active users of the Internet, the real-world male-dominated power relations still worked within the online environment (Herring, 2003; van Zoonen, 2002). This also supports the feminist observation of ‘internalised oppression’ (Rowlands, 1995, 1997), through which women have accepted traditional heteronormative standards concerning feminine behaviours and even viewed them as ‘taken-for-granted’.

Moreover, although a satisfactory number of female bloggers used their blogs to reform themselves as either ‘agony aunts’ or ‘tutors/guides’, the instructions they had given were in fact conservative and reactionary. In most cases, these bloggers used this advice to demonstrate their mastery of intimate matters and show their competence in offering psychological support to readers. Yet, the findings show that both the ‘agony aunt’ and ‘tutorial/guide’ advice sought and given did not help women to develop a heightened sense of self. In reality, it was to persuade readers to behave like good docile Chinese women and to discipline their practices within this framework of social rules, norms, and values. Thus, here, Foucault’s theory still also works within the context of China. For instance, these female authors often stressed the importance of traditional ideals of love, marriage, and sexual relationship, beauty ideals, and a strong normative femininity, which, in their eyes, constitute a very fundamental aspect of a Chinese woman’s life. Despite the fact that they encouraged women to enjoy pleasure and to gain self-confidence, this freedom of personal choice needed to conform with cultural traditions. Such findings also reflect Chinese contextual ideals of ‘what it means to be a woman’. As introduced in Chapter 4, marriage has long been a key issue centred around Chinese women.

Worse still, the intentions of some ‘agony aunts’ were driven by commercialisation. They did not play a positive role in raising women’s awareness about gender. On the contrary, they used attention-grabbing answers to increase click



rates and rendered readers' experiences in 'love, marriage, and sexual relationships' as a sales product. In this respect, the weblogs provided an alternative platform for these female 'professional writers' to commodify their blogs by focusing attention-grabbing posts about sexuality. This supports Evan's view that sexuality in China, as the result of widespread discussion in public media, has rendered women's self identity into the consumer market. As also shown in the study, sometimes, these 'professional writers' even adopted a sarcastic, ironic tone to criticise those women readers who had experienced love affairs, a loss of virginity, or one-night stands. As well as using this strategy to 'catch more eyes', they once more reinforced a moralism and rendered women anchored into traditional norms, rather than to promote the enjoyment of sexual pleasure.

In comparison to the 'personal journal', 'agony aunt', and 'tutorial/guide', the features analysis further shows that 'criticism/view' posts occupied a weak position. This is because only ten *SBE* bloggers, two *women activists*, and one *pioneer* wrote topics on 'current events and news' or 'gender politics'. To explain why so few women bloggers participated in public discussions, incorporated feminist standpoints into the political discourse, or challenged the conventional values around gender, we should take into account some contextual dimensions. Firstly, the factor of 'internalised oppression' once again drove women bloggers to accept that it was not appropriate to speak about their views on 'current events and news', which, according to traditional Chinese norms, should be men's topics only. This is also shaped by the Chinese male-dominated belief system in which women are disciplined, regulated, and nominalised to maintain harmonious family relationships, rather than to engage in public, political debate. Secondly, the term 'feminism' in China is a word that most women shy away from, as it tends to be reminiscent of fierce political movements, implying protest, radicalism, and turmoil (Min, 2007). Even worse is the fact that a Chinese 'feminist' needs to struggle against misogyny. These contextual factors might explain why some female bloggers – like 'Ai Xiaoyang' (labelling herself as 'a medium-degree feminism') – chose a conservative method to express their 'feminist' concerns.

At this point, what is interesting is that, for *women activist* bloggers, adopting a milder form of tackling the issue of 'gender politics' can be interpreted as a strategy of 'self-censorship' in order to cope with online censorship, instead of a way to disguise

their 'feminist' identities. For instance, there was a higher degree of 'trolling' comments on the blogs authored by *women activists* and the *pioneer* when compared with those on the *SBE* and *Green-Red Group* blogs. This again presents a picture of structural and cultural constraints relating to gender, as posts concerned with gender politics hint at a challenge to dominant patriarchal discourse. It is therefore clear that a public demonstration of female political views provides an obvious target and these blogs are thus more likely to experience virtual attacks.

Furthermore, the architectural features afforded by weblogs allowed the selected female writers to control for the most favourable portrayals of themselves (see Butler, 1990; Goffman, 1959). For instance, they could choose components such as 'profile name', 'blog title', 'profile picture' and 'self-description' offered by the weblogs in order to project their identity. They could also show their 'publications', 'posts recommended by editors' and use hyperlinks to present a professional image. All of these aspects suggest that the Internet helps women bloggers to relate the self to social interactions and negotiations with other people (see Buckingham, 2008; Lister, 2003). However, this does not preclude the possibility that some female bloggers performed their femininity against a heterosexual social context. This is particularly the case for the blogging pseudonym of the Green-Red Group member Zhao Hong, where she deliberately constructed a good-looking female image to grab men's attention.

In terms of personal social networks, the results show that weblogs offered opportunities for mutual communication between female bloggers and their readers (see Donath & boyd, 2004; Haythornthwaite, 2005). While most authors allowed readers to post comments, they responded more often to old acquaintances than to strangers. This suggests that the power to strengthen social ties with commentators is in the hands of the female bloggers themselves. Yet, at the same time, the potential of weblogs to enhance a sense of 'we-ness' exists, as the majority of readers' comments are used to show their support and to express thanks to the blogger.

In addition to this 'audience circle', the results of social network analysis illustrate that weblogs encouraged women to build 'peer circles' based on common interests. However, women did not fully leverage the communicative possibilities of weblogs in this respect, as only a small number of SBE bloggers had connections with each other. One possible explanation for this refers to the 'carnival' character of China's online

spaces, which are filled with jokes, satire and unfriendly voices (Herold & Marolt, 2011; Yang, 2003b, 2009b). This in turn lowers the levels of trust between people, especially between strangers. Nevertheless, in the case of the *Green-Red Group*, weblogs have helped its constituent members to build, develop and strengthen their social relationships with each other. This can be viewed as a good example to illustrate the power of the Internet to generate new patterns of affiliation between individuals, but this normally worked best between old acquaintances.

Therefore, the synthesis of my results of the selected women's blogs generated a paradoxical picture of the relationship between women's empowerment and the Internet. On one hand, the weblogs contributed a broad range of participative practices to fostering women's sense of development: women could become agents by bringing personal, private, and intimate issues into the public sphere; they could control the flow of personal information based on their needs to project a particular identity; they could use connections to construct their own social networks. Yet, on the other hand, the system-wide patriarchal structure in place (Collins, 2000) disciplines women to monitor their manners to follow the traditional standards of femininity, which undermines their capacity to develop individual autonomy and to bring about changes in their everyday life. At the same time, the pervasive commercialisation of the Chinese Internet has worsened this tendency, in which women bloggers' real content orients more towards the male gaze. In addition, state censorship has become another factor that undermines the empowerment of these women bloggers, especially those women activists. Thus, taking all of this into account, I argue that the Internet provides the potential for, but falls short of producing a rise in, self-empowerment among Chinese women.

### **8.2.2 The Internet and the Emergence of a Political Process of Women's Empowerment**

To answer the second research question, the analysis focuses on the websites of 17 women's groups based in Mainland China: two are 'government agencies', nine are 'civic associations', three are 'university-based centres', and another three are 'online communities'. This sample includes different types of organisational actors, both within and outside the party-state. These selected women's groups addressed a breadth

of women's issues, including gender equality, domestic violence, sexual abuse and harassment, law reforms, women's development, portrayal of women in the media, resistance to male hegemony in academic research, poverty of rural women, and equal pay. These issues almost covered the concerns that had been written in China's legislative framework, as mentioned in Chapter 4. Yet, they did not pay attention to women's personal issues that they might experience in everyday life, and only 'online communities' advocated for homosexual rights.

Empirical data is primarily derived from in-depth interviews with 22 staff members selected from 12 women's groups. These respondents revealed their perceptions of women's empowerment and application of the Internet in relation to their work activities. They also provided contextual information about women's groups and the development of gender equality in China, as well as the purposes of setting up their websites. The data was complemented by a features analysis of selected websites and a social network analysis which was used to reveal the 17 group actors' relational patterns based on their hyperlinks.

From the outset, all women's groups in my study showed their desire to catch up with technological developments for fear of being left out, as they were already in a periphery position in terms of Chinese society. In their eyes, setting up a website seemed to be the 'only choice' in order to draw public attention. Through the production of a set of online features, these studied organisational actors had opportunities to present information about themselves and to stress their identities. Yet, given the different organisational types involved, the underlying purposes in this regard were varied. Represented as the mouthpiece for China's Communist Party (CCP), the 'government agencies' predominantly used their websites as a new marketing tool in public relations exercises. The aim of their online content was to present their work accomplishments, 'singing the praises of the government'. Hence, it is no surprise that engaging or exchanging ideas with the audience was not the prioritised focus of their websites.

This ran in sharp contrast to 'civic associations': although this type of actor also relied heavily on websites to present information about the group to the general public, their underlying intention was to 'make their voices heard'. Yet, due to government control, they did not have sufficient money to develop their websites into resourceful

portals. At times, several groups needed to censor their online content (e.g. Woman-Legal Aid [WLA]; Women Watch China [WWC]), as their organisational goals were to promote law reforms – a key target of online surveillance. Worse still, ‘civic associations’ had to compete with big commercial sites to be heard, which was also the case for ‘online communities’. Thus, even though ‘civic associations’ and ‘online communities’ showed their willingness to draw public support, a lack of resources as well as their marginalised position constrained them to do so.

At the same time, among the studied women’s groups, one surprising finding pertained to the good use of their websites to shape audiences’ perceptions of gender ideas, beliefs and values, and served as an important means of generating women’s awareness about their subordinate or even oppressed status. The empirical findings clearly show that all the examined women’s groups frequently offered ‘news articles and reports’, ‘guides to further reading’, ‘featured projects’, ‘policy and law analysis’, ‘slogans’, ‘newsletters’, and a ‘tag’ option to enhance the visibility of various women’s issues to their site visitors. Among them, the most important issue was to educate the public about Chinese gender equality due to their vague understanding of gender and gender equality.

However, data revealed that different types of organisational actors tackled this issue from different perspectives. For ‘government agencies’, the focus was mainly on policy aspects to introduce the government’s efforts to protect women’s rights and interests, such as having the same retirement age between men and women, women’s health, and women’s participation in decision-making. Yet again, this can be interpreted as an alternative strategy to present the CCP’s achievements in the promotion of gender equality in China.

In the case of ‘civic associations’, more light was shed on specific issues as well as addressing different groups of Chinese women. These included fighting domestic violence, rural women’s rights, sexual harassment in the workplace, equal pay, women’s development, and stereotyped gender representations in the media. A possible reason for this may be that all these issues were closely related to women’s life and circumstances since the economic reform era (from late 1980s onwards), as well as being written into the national legislative framework (see Chapter 4). Thus, despite the fact that ‘civic associations’ published information on a wide range of women’s

issues on their websites, they still followed structural rules to help women gain greater control over their own lives. In other words, due to the state control, the views, ideas, and beliefs they spread through the Internet were within the governmental framework.

In terms of ‘university-based centres’ and ‘online communities’, the results show that they paid more attention to reshaping the discourse on gender. For instance, group actors of ‘university-based centres’ used their websites as a public lecture space to spread proper knowledge on feminism, telling the public that ‘feminism’ was not an ‘evil’ concept. Apart from feminist rights, ‘online communities’ also mobilised participants to debate on issues of gay rights and sexual rights, but only attracted a small group of followers.

However, once again, the attempts of women’s groups – be they ‘government agencies’, ‘civic associations’, ‘university-based centres’, or ‘online communities’ – to use knowledge to promote women’s awareness were constrained by the patriarchal culture. This is because, in reality, many Chinese women still believe that they are responsible for all domestic labour and need to obey the orders of their fathers or husbands.

Furthermore, the present study demonstrated that although women’s groups used websites to facilitate communication with individual supporters, there was an absence of a collective sense created between them. On the surface, the websites allowed for greater ease of affiliation between women’s groups and individuals. While all groups welcomed individuals to directly ‘email’ them, a limited number provided the general public with access to register as ‘official members’. This might be the result of the way in which interested people registered. To become part of the ‘inner ring’ of certain groups, people needed to offer detailed personal information, which in turn put their privacy at risk. In this sense, the majority of women’s groups provided much easier access to encourage people to join them, such as becoming email subscribers or followers of their social media accounts. Moreover, women’s groups differed in terms of the recruitment of ‘volunteers’. In that respect, due to material constraints, ‘civic associations’ and ‘online communities’ showed a stronger preference for volunteers. In contrast, ‘government agencies’ and ‘university-based centres’ served little purpose in engaging volunteers, as the former group actors were resource rich while the latter had a large number of students to rely upon. Yet, for ‘civic associations’ and ‘online

communities', the potential for the Internet to recruit volunteers was limited, as the intention of many people in becoming volunteers was to advance their career rather than contribute to the cause.

As well as using websites as a way for like-minded people to form an aggregate, many of my studied women's groups also realised the potential of the Internet to construct interactions with people in order to reinforce a sense of the collective. However, the results show that these groups were reluctant to develop interactive features on their websites, even though they knew that they ought to do so. The main reason in this respect referred to the *public character* of websites, in which readers' comments were visible to *all*, including the Internet police. This situation was worsened if some commentators posted messages against the government – which would put the group at risk of being blocked, as the group's website coordinators could not control what they could say. This contextual factor hindered many groups from fully developing the interactive features on their websites. Furthermore, a lack of resources was another reason for the groups' reluctance to increase the degree of online interactivity. In addition, despite the fact that social media could facilitate communication with audiences in a more efficient manner, some groups expressed their concerns over the tension between interaction and organisational credibility. The Chinese backlash against feminism added a further dimension of difficulty to fostering a sense of a collective via public communication platforms.

However, this does not mean that the Internet did not play a role in developing strong ties between women's groups and their supporters. Instead, the empirical evidence shows that a few groups turned to more *private* communication platforms to maintain participants' engagement through which mutual interactions emerged between them, something that was, at times, accompanied by face-to-face communication.

When it comes to campaigning, it is clear that women's groups, aside from 'government agencies', included limited 'non-disruptive' (Yang, 2009b, 2014a) online actions on their websites to mobilise individuals to take part in their activities. Among the few 'non-disruptive' features, a 'plan of (non-disruptive) offline activities' was the most prevalent, especially for 'civic associations'. The reason this is called 'non-disruptive' is more evident in this respect, as the activities presented on the websites

were mostly lectures, seminars, photography/drawing contests, community services, or training activities. None were related to 'protests', a fact that could be attributed to Internet censorship and state control as introduced in Chapter 4. Even so, a few key leaders from the 'civic associations' had the experience of being called to have tea in the police station, which could be considered as another repressive strategy to control these groups.

Thus, in the online public space, it was impossible for women's groups to show their 'protests' or 'radical' elements. However, it is worth keeping in mind that all of the information about activities published online was about *plans* but not *actions* – these instead occurred in the offline realm. From this perspective, no one could promise that the content of those offline actions would not be related to 'radical' elements, even if the activities or events organised by women's groups were in 'non-disruptive' form. Yet, online censorship did not diminish the need for women's groups to organise ephemeral campaigns (e.g. e-petitions) to express their concerns. Sometimes, some 'civic associations' used their websites as broadcasting platforms to disseminate information about their offline lobbying activities, aiming to present their efforts in order to change the structural constraints on women's status.

Finally, although the Internet relaxes the constraints of geographical distance to facilitate connection-building among organisations who fight for a common cause, the women's groups I interviewed for this study were not obsessed with using their websites as a base for alliance-building. Instead, most of them heavily relied on face-to-face contact to build, maintain, or reinforce inter-organisational relations. Moreover, this process involved some conflict between 'government agencies' and non-governmental group actors because of their different organisational character and political positions. A major point of departure in this regard seemed to be their relation with the state regime. Still, it is worth noting here that the data on my social network analysis revealed that hyperlinks did indeed provide new opportunities for women's groups to connect with each other and to form an information-sharing circle among themselves, an activity that could form a virtual inter-organisational relationship. The fact nonetheless remains that such collectivity, regardless of 'the virtual' or 'the real', was placed at the periphery of Chinese society. Hence, it was still



a long process for them to claim a legitimate political voice and to bring about social change.

Therefore, based on the study of these women's groups, the picture that emerges is more complex than that of female bloggers. This study offers solid empirical evidence that women's groups, albeit with different positions and prioritised goals, are under no illusion that the Internet harbours the source of success for women's empowerment. For one thing, my exploration reveals that the Internet has not been used as an effective means of interacting with prospective individual participants, or to help develop the sense of a collective. The fact remains that all of the women's groups studied have predominantly treated their websites as a cost-efficient tool to enhance group recognition. Contrastingly, instead of the Internet, women's groups have primarily relied on face-to-face communication to form inter-organisational alliances. At the same time, aside from 'government agencies', all remaining group actors needed to struggle through a lack of resources, state control, and competition from commercial portals. Thus, in the present study, the potential for the Internet to form 'coalition politics' (Yuval-Davis, 1994) to bring about changes in existing structures of power, was rather limited.

### **8.3 Implications for the Internet and Chinese Women's Empowerment**

Situated in a country embedded in strict state control, patriarchal authority, as well the beginning of a commercial culture, the relationship between the Internet and women's empowerment – be they individual or group actors – renders a complex and at times contradictory image. My study suggests that the potential of the Internet for raising women's awareness, bringing about changes in everyday life, and organising collective action to transform male-dominated structures, is limited, although it enables women's empowerment in different ways. The current analysis offers clear indications that there is a sharp distinction between the diverse *communicative practices* afforded by the Internet, and their restricted *real use* for female bloggers and women's groups. On some occasions, these women actors experienced new forms of disadvantage, prejudice, or even oppression, as the Internet can also be a space filled with patriarchal ideologies of consumerism, judgement, and control.

More specifically, my findings provide solid evidence for a fuller understanding of both women's everyday struggles, and the political agenda concerning unequal power relations shaped by Chinese patriarchal structure. For one thing, female bloggers can be seen as a useful starting point to grasp what issues arouse Chinese women's interest in contemporary society. The commonly addressed issues, on the surface, signal that Chinese women now have opportunities to keep distance from cultural traditions by explicitly expressing their love for beauty, exposing their inner selves to the public, and freely talking about intimate matters. Nonetheless, the real content underlying the popular topics of 'style', 'personal experiences, emotions, and reflections', and 'love, marriage, and sexual relationships' reinforce the patriarchal norms of femininity, instead of rendering them truly empowered to change their life circumstances. In addition, the information published on the websites run by women's groups exemplifies the way in which structural and contextual factors impose restrictions on the promotion of gender equality. In this respect, the issues mainly include fighting domestic violence, marginalised women's rights, equal pay, and equal representation in politics, and aimed to influence policy and advocate for an open environment to foster women's development. Yet, in this challenging process, women's groups need to cope with state control and online censorship. Moreover, it is interesting to note that female bloggers focus on more personal issues than women's groups, while women's groups focus on more political issues than female bloggers. Therefore, as I have shown, the Internet tends to produce a clear picture of women's issues that are likely to lead to actions towards empowerment.

On the other hand, the fact that structure and conventional forms are sticking points in the ways in which women take actions to empower themselves in online public space opens up wider questions about the validity, or even necessity, of the Internet. As I have shown in my study, the selected weblogs contribute to a range of new practices for women to make their personal voices heard, to construct a public self, and to organise their own social networks, but all of these are disciplined within the framework of traditional Chinese femininity. Even if some bloggers talk about sexuality, underlying their messages is a conservative discourse on gender norms. Worse yet, when female bloggers publicly express their feminist identities, they need to face threats from male 'trollers' who fear that their 'power over' women would be

reversed. What is more, this negative influence of the ‘power over’ becomes more apparent when women’s groups use the Internet to strive for a model of ‘women helping women’ in order to initiate the process of women’s empowerment. Given Chinese state control, non-governmental group actors in the first place are constrained by a lack of resources for development, which in turn weakens their voice. This in turn renders their websites more oriented towards a public space to enhance their visibility, rather than to consolidate a collective sense with supporters, to organise campaigns or to build alliances to achieve their collective goals. Even if they have sufficient materials, online censorship is another unavoidable dimension of difficulty for the formation of a collectivity to bring about social change. Despite the fact that ‘government agencies’ do not need to struggle over resources and state control, their role as a mouthpiece for the government requires them to ‘sing praise for the government’ but not to question existing power arrangements.

#### **8.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research**

Exploring the role of the Internet in the process of women’s empowerment in the context of China is relatively new and difficult. Given the complex, shifting nature of both China and ICTs, future studies on the use of additional online spaces by more groups of Chinese women will be important in providing greater insight into the promise and limitations of the Internet for women’s empowerment. In turn, this will raise broader questions about how different female actors translate communicative practices afforded by ICTs into concrete action to empower themselves as well as to bring about change in social structures. Further exploration is also required to learn more about women in marginalised positions in Chinese society and about women’s groups that do not use the Internet at all. This would focus our attention on whether or not the Internet is a must-have to foster women’s empowerment.

The implication of the inappropriate use of feminism in the Chinese context is another dimension that calls for further investigation. We should keep rethinking this question: is women’s empowerment an alternative to Chinese feminism? Based on my study, I argue that women’s empowerment is not feminism *per se*, but has possible implications for a more accurate understanding of feminism in China. As I have introduced in Chapter 4, the China’s Communist Party (CCP) has a long history of

proclaiming feminism as capitalist and anti-socialist, which leads to the rejection of women being recognised as a feminist in public space even if they have feminist beliefs, values and ideas. Another key reason for this situation can be attributed to the 'improper' interpretations of Western feminism when it reappeared in China in the 1980s. It seems that Chinese scholars treat feminism not only as a synonym for women's movements, but also as a unitary term that erases different needs, desires, and requirements for different women actors. Future research could address these concerns by interpreting 'feminism' from different perspectives.

Finally, the relationship between audiences and women's empowerment should be noted. As this study shows, although most comments received by the blogs were positive and supportive, still some were negative or even 'trolling' messages, which may undermine the development of women's empowerment. This dimension could be included in future investigations through which more empirical data needs to be collected to analyse the role of audiences in enabling or constraining women's empowerment. Moreover, although the interviews gathered from women's groups stated that their websites were open to all, it seems that they could only draw attention from small audiences that have an interest in women's issues. However, at this stage of the research, I have not undertaken a detailed analysis of these audiences; this does not mean that audiences do not play a role in the process of women's empowerment. On the other hand, for certain women's groups, they took up a very important position, which is empirically evidenced in these groups' private communication channels. This is a starting point for which future enquiry could benefit. In this sense, the implication of the private-public divide becomes another dimension that calls for further investigation.

## Chapter 9 Concluding Remarks

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This six-year PhD study set out to examine a relatively new question: what is the role of the Internet in the processes of women's empowerment in the context of China? This is because although China has set 'equality between men and women' as a state policy, social structures and state intervention still tend to favour the traditional patriarchal order. Moreover, the beginning of a consumerist society has worsened this situation. Although the Internet has become an important part of Chinese people's daily lives, including women users, its socio-political consequences on women's advancements are still unclear. In this respect, focusing on Chinese female bloggers and women's groups from different organisational types, this study aimed to explore the ways in which these two types of women actors use the Internet, respectively, to develop their capacity to exercise power to bring about change in their life circumstances.

From the vantage point of female bloggers, the findings suggest that the Internet potentially provides a range of communicative practices to facilitate a sense of empowerment among them, such as self-expression, construction of a public self, and organisation of social networks. However, the selected bloggers did not translate these practices into concrete action to raise their consciousness about their disadvantaged position and to bring about changes in their life circumstances. In fact, the weblogs became an alternative platform to discipline their behaviours and to reinforce the patriarchal norms, standards, and requirements of traditional Chinese femininity. Moreover, the pervasive commercialisation of the Internet worsens this tendency and adds another dimension that undermines the promise of empowerment.

From the vantage point of women's groups, the empirical results suggest that the potential of the Internet for the formation of a collective – with both supporters and allies – to change women's subordinate status exists, but that contextual realities prevent its full realisation. In such processes, the most commonly-adopted practice was informing, which is mainly used to increase organisational visibility and promote public awareness of women's issues. This is due, in many ways, to their periphery position in Chinese society. At the same time, non-governmental women's groups face tensions between censorship and the intention to develop interactive features on their websites that allow for the building of a sense of collectivity with supporters. A lack of

resources adds a further dimension of difficulty in this regard. Also, because of governmental control, the Internet's opportunities for organising online campaigns, especially those aimed toward radical elements, are limited. In terms of inter-organisational relationship building, women's groups rely heavily on face-to-face communication in order to collaborate with each other, while the connections based on hyperlinks seem to be a public means of showing that 'we are working together'. In this process, it is also worth keeping in mind the existence of conflict between governmental group actors and non-governmental group actors.

However, in general terms, my study focused on female bloggers and women's groups so as to explore the relationship between the Internet and women's empowerment, indicating that the empirical evidence might not be true for other groups of Chinese women. In addition, if we turn our attention to other Internet applications, such as social media platforms, will the results and insights be different? In this respect, a more systematic methodological framework would have enabled us to develop a better understanding of the ways in which women can use the Internet to raise their gendered consciousness, express their standpoints, construct social interactions, and organise collective action. Towards this end, I would also need more case studies to further the analysis of empirical data.

Therefore, we should keep rethinking about how the Internet encompasses promises, imaginaries, uncertainties, and even threats. Its social and political consequences depend on how women perceive its role in their lives and how women translate its afforded communicative practices into concrete actions. It is true that the Internet contributes to new opportunities, but it falls short of determining social change. In addition, we should keep in mind that women are always situated within unjust power relations and are shaped by patriarchal standards of femininity. This is indeed a complicated phenomenon and hopefully my PhD has contributed to it.

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## Appendix I Features Analysis Codebook for Women's Blogs in Phase I

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### A. Overall Identification

#### A1. Sina service rules:

1. Blog ranking
2. Blog credits
3. Visiting number
4. Following number

**A2. Acquisition date:** date the blog was retrieved for coding

**A3. URL of blog homepage:**

#### A4. Title in title tag:

1. Blogger's name
2. Blogger's name + any associated description
3. Only associated description
4. None

**A5. Title in URL:** (excluding domain names of Sina)

1. Blogger's name
2. Blogger's name + any associated description
3. Only associated description
4. None

### B. Blog Author Characteristics

#### B1. Blogger's name:

1. Pseudonym
2. Pseudonym + full name
3. Full name
4. Full name + description

#### B2. Blogger's image:

1. Self-portrait
2. Blogger's publication
3. Others
4. None
5. Photos with blogger's name

#### B3. Personal information:

1. Not supplied
2. On first page
3. On 'About me' page
4. First page + 'About me'

**B4. Gender:**

1. Male
2. Female
3. Not supplied

**B5. Occupation:**

1. Not supplied
2. Other: (describe)

**B6. Age:**

1. Not supplied
2. After 1990
3. 1980-1989
4. Before 1980

**B7. Geographical location:**

1. Not supplied
2. Other: (give city's name)

**C. Temporal Measures**

**C1. Date of most recent entry** (at time of coding):

**C2. Date of oldest entry:**

**D. Technical Features**

**D1. Search:**

1. Yes
2. No

**D2. Categories:**

1. Yes
2. No

**D3. Music displayed:**

1. Yes
2. No

**D4. Video displayed:**

1. Yes
2. No

**D5. Photo displayed/albums:**

1. Yes
2. No

**D6. Calendar**

1. Yes
2. No

**D7. Archives**

1. Yes
2. No

**E. Blog Type** (based on predominant content from all entries)

1. Personal journal
2. Q&A letters with readers
3. Bricolage

**F. Networking Features**

**F1. RSS:**

1. Yes
2. No

**F2. Sina Weibo:**

1. Yes
2. No

**F3. Compose email to blogger:**

1. Not allowed
2. Allowed

**F4. QQ forum:**

1. Yes
2. No

**F5. Advertisements:**

1. To non-blogger-related products
2. To blogger's publications

**F6. Links:**

1. Blogs within sample
2. Other websites
3. Other women's blogs within Sina
4. Other women's blogs outside Sina
6. Friends' blogs
7. Women's groups' websites
8. Blogger's other social platforms (excluding Weibo and QQ)
10. Blogger's recommended posts
11. Specific featured posts/blogs on the Sina platform
12. None

**F7. Comments:**

1. Comments allowed on first page
2. Comments allowed on entries
3. Both allowed
4. Both not allowed

**F8. Re-tweeting of posts:**

1. Not allowed
2. Allowed

## **Appendix II Features Analysis Codebook for Websites of Women's Groups in Phase I**

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### **A. Features of Provided Information**

1. Articles produced by mainstream news platforms
2. Articles from international sources
3. Articles produced by alternative news platforms
4. Articles produced by group leaders
5. Articles produced by other women's groups
6. Articles produced by the group
7. Articles published by journals or magazines
8. Articles published by portal sites
9. Group description
10. Group history
11. Legal information and policy
12. Newsletter
13. Recommendations of further readings
14. RSS

### **B. Features of Interaction**

1. Activity log of volunteers
2. Comments
3. Contact information about the group
4. Email to webmasters
5. Hotline services
6. Letters from readers
7. Online polls
8. Site discussion forums
9. Site search engine
10. Social network sites of the group

### **C. Features of Assemblage of Women's Mobilised Activities**

1. Activity notice/plans of the group
2. News of international activities
3. News of local activities
4. News of national activities
5. Project/activity description organised by the group

### **D. Features of Fundraising and Resources**

1. International sponsorship
2. Job listings
3. Member registration
4. Soliciting donations

## 5. Volunteer sign-up

### **E. Features of Hyperlinks**

1. Links to All-China Women's Federation
2. Links to alternative media platforms
3. Links to government agencies
4. Links to international civic associations
5. Links to international women's organisations
6. Links to mainstream media platforms
7. Links to national organisations
8. Links to other women's groups
9. Links to portal sites
10. Links to supervisory units

## **Appendix III Interview Guide for Women's Groups**

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### **Part I Introduction**

A brief summary of my research topic

### **Part II Key Topics**

#### **1. How to work**

Q. Could you please briefly introduce the group?

- daily working activities
- group mission

Q. When did you launch the website?

- the reason for establishing the website
- is it Internet-based or Internet-enhanced?
- who is the coordinator?
- what kinds of information are published on the website?

Q. How do you make use of the Internet for your group work? Could you please give one or two examples?

Q. Where do the group's financial resources come from? Do you include sponsor details in the external hyperlinks section of your website?

Q. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet for the group's work activities?

#### **2. Discussion about gender and women's NGOs in China**

Q. Could you please tell me your ideas about the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW)? How do you understand the concept of 'gender equality' and 'gender mainstreaming'?

Q. What do you think of NGOs?

- the nature of the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF)
- the relationship between women's groups (mainly civic associations) and the ACWF
- hyperlinks with other women's groups

#### **3. Discussion about feminism in China**

Q. What do you think of feminism?

- opinions about feminism and woman-ism
- do you acknowledge that you are a feminist? Why or why not?
- the influence of Western feminism



- are there any women's movements in China?

#### **4. Internet communication**

Q. Do you have a blog?

#### **5. Discussion about identity and agency**

Q. How do you define yourself as a woman?

Q. Do you have shared beliefs, values and ideas within the group?

#### **6. Free talking about the Internet and women**

Q. Do you think about censorship when you publish any information on the website or the blog (if the interviewee has one)?

Q. What do you think of women's status quo in China, in a general way?  
Do you think the Internet can open up a new window of opportunity to women?

Q. What do you think about the development of women's groups in China?

Q. What do you think about the role of the Internet?  
Do you have any ideas about how to better use it for your group's work?  
Do you think the mode of 'the Internet and women's groups' can work in China?

#### **Part III Summing up and Comments**

Anything else?

## **Appendix IV Email Interview Guide for Ai Xiaoyang**

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### **Part I Introduction**

A brief summary of my research topic

### **Part II Key Topics**

#### **1. Getting started using the blog**

Q. When did you open your blog account?  
Why did you choose the Sina platform?

Q. Have you thought about why your blog is popular?

Q. In the early stages, I noticed you used your blog as a personal journal. You were talking about your life, your work... Is that true?

Q. How did you get the idea to use the blog to communicate with readers on the topics on love, marriage and sexual relationships?

#### **2. Identity**

Q. When you are writing articles on the blog, do you consider the following: I am a woman, so my blog is about women-related content?

Q. When you reply to readers' questions on love, marriage and sexual relationships, do you have any 'identity transformation' (do you think you are a consultant or a listener?)

#### **3. Social networking on the blogs**

Q. What do you think of Sina Blog Eladies (SBE)?

Q. Do your members have a close relationship?

Q. I noticed some bloggers often publish articles about sensational topics, have you read any of their blogs? What do you think of them?

Q. Do you often interact with your readers? I mean, do you reply to their comments? In general, are those comments friendly or not?  
How do you react to unfriendly comments?

Q. When you see that some of your articles have been reposted, do you have a sense of self-validation?

#### **4. Free talking**

Q. Is there any difference when you use the blog to speak out, compared to using traditional media (e.g. newspapers, magazines)?

Q. Have you ever thought about censorship when you are blogging?

Q. What are your ideas about the role of the Internet for women's lives?

Q. How do you understand feminism in China?

**Why do you call yourself 'a medium-degree' feminist?**

[Note: this is a key question, so I highlighted it in the email]

Q. Anything else?

## Appendix V Names of Interviewees

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### Government Agencies

#### **All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) at Henan Province Level**

Date: 20 February 2012

Place: Zhengzhou, Henan Province

Interviewing Form: Group Interview

Participants: Dong Lin, Wang Xueping, Wang Pei, Tian Ruijuan

Role in the Group: Senior Lecturers

#### **Chinese Women's Research Network (WSIC)**

Date: 14 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant: Ma Yan

Role in the Group: Senior Researcher

### Civic Associations

#### **Anti-Domestic Violence Network (ADVN)**

Date: 21 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant 1: Liu Xiaojuan

Participant 2: Feng Yuan

Role in the Group: Programme  
Director

Role in the Group: Founder and Leader

#### **Gender and Development in China (GAD);**

#### **Gender Watch Women's Voice (GWWV)**

Date: 13 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant: Lv Pin\* (whose blog was blocked due to its sensational content)

Role in the Group: Organiser

#### **The Maple Women's Psychological Counselling Centre Beijing (MWPPC)**

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Date: 12 March 2012

Date: 19 March 2012

Participant 1: Hu Pin

Participant 2: Gao Yucong

Role in the Group: Programme  
Director

Role in the Group: Public Relations  
Executive

#### **Rural Women (RW)**

Date: 14 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant: Xie Lihua\* (in the additional sample of women's blogs)

Role in the Group: Founder and Organiser

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**Woman-Legal Aid (WLA)**

Date: 23 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: Group Interview

Participants: Guo Jianmei, Lv Xiaoquan

Role in the Group: Founder and Organiser (Guo);  
Director of Research Department (Lv)

**Women Watch in China (WWC)**

Date: 23 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant: Lin Lixia

Role in the Group: Secretary General

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**University-Based Centres****Sex/Gender Education Forum at Sun Yat-Sen University (SGEF-SYSU):**

Date: 11 April 2012

Place: Guangzhou

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Participant: Ke Qianting\* (in the additional sample of women's blogs)

Role in the Group: Organiser

**UNESCO Chair on Media and Gender at Communication University of China (UNESCO-MG-CUC):**

Date: 14 March 2012

Place: Beijing

Interviewing Form: Group Interview

Participants: Wang Qin, Li Huiqun, Tang Jinying, Huang Shuyuan, Zhang Ying,  
and two students

Role in the Group: Lecturers

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**Online Communities****Online Feminism in China (FCN)**

Place: Shanghai

Interviewing Form: One-to-One

Date: 2 March 2012

Participant 1: Chen Yaya

Role in the Group: Founder and  
Organiser

Date: 3 March 2012

Participant 2: Yu Tingting

Role in the Group: Coordinator

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**Women's Blogs****Name: Ai Xiaoyang (SBE)**

Interviewing Form: Email Interview

Date: 7 March 2012

Occupation: Freelancer

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**Green-Red Group (Zhengzhou, Henan Province)**

Name	Interviewing Form	Date	Occupation
Lv Jing	One-to-One	21 March 2012	Associate Editor

Zhao Hong	One-to-One	21 March 2012	Associate Editor
Wang Xiaoping	One-to-One	21 March 2012	Associate Editor
Zhang Ping	One-to-One	21 March 2012	Associate Editor

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## **Appendix VI Interview Guide for the Green-Red Group**

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### **Part I Introduction**

A brief summary of my research topic

Q: Could you please briefly introduce yourself? What is your occupation?

### **Part II Key Topics**

#### **1. Getting started with the blog**

Q. When did you open your blog account?

Why did you choose the Sina platform?

Q. Have you thought about why your blog is popular?

Q. Are you using the blog as a personal journal to document your life? Do you have any audience in mind?

Q. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the blog?

#### **2. Identity**

Q. Why is your blog title...? Did you include some elements in your blog title to indicate that you are a woman? How do you define yourself as a woman?

Q. What is the difference between 'the self on the blog' and the real self?

Q. [Select specific post – with women as the subject, for the bloggers to expand on the discussion about women's identity]

#### **3. Social networking on blogs**

Q. In your blogroll, is there anyone who shares similar interests with you? Do you have a close relationship with your 'blog friends'?

Q. What do you think of Sina Blog Eladies (SBE)?

Q. I noticed some SBE bloggers often publish articles about sensational topics, have you read any of their blogs? What do you think of them?

Q. Do you often interact with your readers? I mean, do you reply to their comments? In general, are those comments friendly or not? How do you react to unfriendly comments?

Q. When you see that some of your articles have been reposted, do you have a sense of self-validation?

#### **4. Free talking**

Q. Is there any difference when you use the blog to speak out, compared with using traditional media (e.g. newspapers, magazines)?

Q. Have you ever thought about censorship and privacy when you are blogging?

Q. What are your ideas about the role of the Internet for women's lives?

Q. Anything else?



## **Appendix VII Final Codebook for Women's Blogs**

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### **A. Basic Information**

A1. Blog acquisition date:

A2. Blog coding date:

A3. Date of current entry:

A4. Date of oldest entry:

A5. Blog traffic:

Number of visitors:

Number of followers:

The highest number of reads for an article: (note down the title)

The highest number of comments on an article: (note down the title)

### **B. Identity of Blog Authors**

B1. Blogger's name:

1. Pseudonym

2. Real name

3. Both

B2. Blog description:

1. Metaphor

2. Work affiliation

3. No description

B3. Sina Verified (Occupation)

1. Yes, specify the descriptive title provided by Sina

2. No, if the blogger provides the occupation:

B4. Blogger's self-description

1. Personal facts provided by Baidu

2. Narrative

3. Working experiences/activities

4. None

B5. Blogger's self-promotion

1. Micro-blogging account

2. Other social networking sites (specify:)

3. Video presentation

4. Author's other blogs

5. Websites created by the blogger

6. Blogger's publications

### **C. Blog's Structural Features**

1. Search
2. Categories
3. Music
4. Photo album
5. Guestbook
6. Articles recommended by Sina
7. Map and footpath
8. Movie watched
9. Calendar
10. Blogroll
11. Subscriptions

### **D. Blog Content**

#### **D1. Blog Topical Focus:**

1. Style
2. Personal experiences, emotions and reflections
3. Love, marriage, and sexual relationships
4. Current events and news
5. Parenting
6. Arts showcase
7. Noting down others for non-SBE blogs

#### **D2. Content Re-Posting**

1. Blogger agreed
2. Not Permitted
3. Permission granted

### **E. Blog Interactivity**

1. Comments on blog posts
2. Leaving messages on the main page
3. E-mail

### **F. Blog Links**

1. To within-sample blogs
2. To other blogs (friends or interested bloggers)
3. To websites related to the blogger's interests
4. To news articles with the blogger as the subject
5. None

## **Appendix VIII Final Codebook for Websites of Women's Groups**

### **A. Group information dissemination**

1. Shared news, articles or videos
2. Further reading
3. Featured issues or topics
4. Policy/law documents or analysis
5. Websites displaying in other languages
6. Explanation of key words on women's issues
7. Introduction of similar resources

### **B. Group view expression**

1. Self-produced articles analysing specific women's issues
2. Self-produced electronic newsletters/bulletins (with content and download links)
3. Group members' original blog posts
4. Group volunteers' SMS discussion group chat history on specific topics

### **C. Group self-presentation**

1. Activity news
2. About us
3. Featured projects
4. Group position declaration and statements
5. Tag section
6. Website description
7. Activity photos

### **D. Personal online visitor behaviour**

1. Homepage bookmark
2. Tell someone else about this website
3. RSS
4. Site search engine

### **E. Personal view expression for visitors**

1. Writing comments
2. Online polls (self-produced group polls or reposted polls from other websites)
3. Online forum/chatroom
4. Personal articles and stories
5. Manuscript submission to group's internal publication

### **F. Visitors' personal interaction with women's groups**

1. Group contact information

2. A direct contact email address to the webmasters (this email address is not the group's general information address)
3. Group counselling service provision
4. Electronic newsletter or bulletin sign-up
5. Social media platforms for groups

#### **G. Resources support**

1. Recruitment messages
2. Volunteering opportunities
3. Volunteers' first-person accounts
4. Online member registration
5. Group fundraising
6. Printed publication subscription

#### **H. Participatory support**

1. Calls for participation
2. Online petition
3. Training information
4. Calls for donations to specific group programmes

#### **I. Networks between the 17 women's groups**

1. News sharing
2. Resource-sharing messages
3. Coordinated action
4. Links to websites of other women's groups
5. Links to affiliation websites of other women's groups
6. Links to websites of All-China Women's Federation affiliation institutes

#### **J. Linkages**

1. Links to independent civic groups/organisations
2. Links to international foundations or foundation programmes
3. Links to commercial websites
4. Links to official non-profit organisations
5. Links to United Nations organisations
6. Links to universities, research institutions or centres
7. Embedded links to recommended blogs
8. Links to government departments
9. Links to press sites
10. Links to portal sites
11. Links to external online community sites

#### **K. External support for other civic groups/organisations**

1. Reposted recruitment messages

2. Reposted messages on donation projects
3. Reposted calls for participation